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1 Corinthians 11:2-16

19th Message

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## WOMEN IN WORSHIP

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

Most of us have heard of Lisa Olson, the *Boston Herald* reporter who had a run-in with some members of the New England Patriots professional football team. When she walked into their locker room after they had lost a game, she said, she was merely doing what every other reporter present was doing—trying to get the best story she could, as fast as she could. The football players were naked, on their way to the showers. Ms. Olsen, fully dressed and wielding a note pad and pen, claimed that several of the men made sexually threatening gestures and comments toward her. Journalists across the country picked up the story immediately and came to the defense of one of their own. They cried “Foul!” and demanded their rights. Female reporters, they said, deserved the same rights as male reporters. “Equal access” became the cry. Once again, the centuries-old issue of how men and women relate to one another was headline news.

Through the centuries the church also has struggled with this question. The place of women in the life and leadership of the Christian community, for instance, has been an especially troublesome subject. This extremely sensitive and contemporary problem is dealt with to some extent in the passage to which we come today in the apostle Paul’s first Corinthian letter.

As we saw last week, chapters 11–14 of this letter deal with three matters of abuse in the Corinthians’ worship services. The first concern related to women’s head coverings when women were praying or prophesying (11:2-16); the second related to the abuse of the poor at the Lord’s table (11:17-34); and the third to speaking in tongues in the worship services (12–14). Last week, because many of our women were away on their annual church retreat, we dealt with the second concern, so today we will take the first issue, the matter of the wearing of veils by women in the worship service. I need to say at the outset that this passage is very difficult to interpret, and the argument hard to follow, because Paul interweaves theological and cultural perspectives, and he uses some words both literally and metaphorically.

One of the problems in interpreting 1 Corinthians is that this is a letter; it is not a book. We don’t have all the communication, nor do we know all the information that the writer and the recipients held in common. On thing we do know is that the Corinthians had written a letter to Paul asking about practical matters concerning the application of New Testament principles, and some of those things had to do with cultural matters and customs. This appears to be the situation in this chapter. They had asked about the practice of wearing head coverings in the public meetings of the church.

In first century Greece, dress for men and women was apparently very similar, except for the woman’s head covering. This was not the equivalent of the Arab veil; it was a covering for her hair alone. The normal, everyday dress of all Greek women included this veil (called a *kalumma*). The only women who did not wear them were the high-class mistresses of influential Corinthians and the sacred prostitutes from the temple of Aphrodite. To further complicate the matter, slaves had their heads shaved, as did convicted adulteresses.

We must understand therefore that we are not talking about any special “dressing up” for attendance at church meetings. The men came without any head coverings and the women dressed with them, just as in everyday life.

It is important to understand the plight of women in the first century. Women were not highly prized in either the Hebrew or Greco-Roman cultures. They were under the authority of their fathers or husbands. They were oppressed, and were treated like second-class citizens. Women had no voting privileges. They could not testify in a court of law; they could not claim the right to an education. They were viewed, in a sense, as property. Likewise in the Hebrew world, women had no rights, and little education. They had to sit in the gallery in the synagogue. There was such a decline in their status that before Jesus came, the rabbis said, “It is better to burn the Torah than to teach it to women.” Many Jewish men prayed daily, “Blessed be God who has not made me a gentile, a slave, or a woman.”

The gospels, however, set out a completely different view of women. The gospel elevates women. Whenever it is preached and understood accurately, the gospel always changes the status of women. It grants them respect, honor, dignity and equality in the eyes of man. We must remember that in creation, male and female were created in the image of God and are joint heirs of the grace of life.

As the gospel took root in Corinth, however, and women began to enjoy their new-found respect and honor, some of them wondered, “Why should we wear these head coverings any longer? Let’s demonstrate our freedom by burning these head bands.” Particularly in the public meetings, where women had an exalted position of being able to pray and prophesy, they felt they should do away with these veils. Apparently in the excitement of worship, certain of them were tempted to throw back their head coverings and allow their hair (which they wore long) to fall loose. Naturally, this caused a great deal of commotion, and a certain amount of distraction among the men. Furthermore, their actions seemed to signify a denial of their submission to their husbands.

So with this as a backdrop, let us see what Paul has to say about this issue. He begins with a word of commendation. 1 Corinthians 11:2

**Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. (1 Cor 11:2 NASB)**

After all the problem things we have learned about this church it is a pleasant surprise to see that Paul is commending them for something. These traditions of which he speaks were the fundamentals of the Christian faith that were passed on orally. Remember Paul spent 18 months in Corinth, teaching the church daily. Thus they were well taught, and they followed his teachings to a great extent. Yet it is clear from this letter that there was a contentious element in the church. Perhaps they were the same group of “spiritual women” re-

ferred to in chapter 7. They felt that the new age had arrived, and in their “overrealized eschatology” they were exhorting others to abstain from sex, even in marriage. Perhaps it was they who were making the issue of head coverings for women a bone of contention.

I have divided the passage into three sections. First, the apostle gives a divine pattern for the relationships (vv. 3-6); then the purpose for that pattern (vv. 7-10); and finally, a divine perspective (vv. 11-16).

We will begin by reading the entire passage.

**But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying, disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head; for she is one and the same with her whose head is shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God. (11:2-16)**

## I. A Divine Pattern: The Creation of God (11:3-6)

Paul begins by establishing a foundational principle: There is a divinely ordained pattern for relationships in the Christian community. There is an order of things that is rooted in creation (v. 3). This is part of the apostolic tradition which he handed down to all the churches. He taught them concerning creation and the natural order of things.

Then in verses 4-6, Paul tells the Corinthians that the custom of wearing a headband signifying a woman's submission to her husband was appropriate in that culture, because to challenge that tradition was to challenge the basic principle in v. 3.

Notice that Paul's argument is rooted in creation (the established order that God originally made before the fall), not in redemption: “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.” He is not in conflict with himself when he says later in Galatians “there is neither male nor female in Christ.” In fact in verse 11, he states the same truth as he did in Galatians: “However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.”

The apostle stresses the pattern of relationships which God has ordained for the Christian community. Let us examine verse 3. His point in this context is the middle one, “man is the head of the woman.” I want to examine the first and third examples initially,

because from them we can better understand what the middle example means.

The first one is, “Christ is the head of every man.” That is a declaration of Christ's right to lead the whole human race. Paul states it as a fact. He does not say he wishes Christ was the head of every man. He says that Christ is the head of every man. Christ is the sovereign Lord of the universe. We are given the option of bending the knee to him now, or later, for when we see him in his glory we shall all bend the knee. That is why Paul can say Christ is the head of every man—even those who reject his leadership.

The apostle begins with Christ because he wants to teach us about the nature of authority—what headship really looks like. This is where we often go astray in the church. When men begin to understand that God wants them to be the head of their homes, they tend to take their understanding of authority from the world and assume that is what headship means. However, if you look at the way Jesus leads his church, you will see that leadership is a position of serving, not ruling. It is a responsibility we exercise, not a position we hold. When James and John sought authority and position in the kingdom, the other disciples became indignant because they too wanted to be regarded as great. “The gentiles lord it over each other,” said Jesus, “but it shall not be so among you.” Jesus led quietly. He didn't bark out orders. He didn't demand that everyone salute when he walked by. He didn't demand that every one give him the respect he deserved as God. He could have, but instead he washed feet as a servant. He gave up his rights and privileges as God and took on the role of a servant. That is the nature of our headship as men. Our leadership is to be servant leadership. We motivate others to follow us out of our love and obedience. Our wives are not our servants. In fact, biblically we are their servants. That is how we work out our leadership.

Secondly, says Paul, “God is the head of Christ.” Here we have a manifestation of headship in history. Jesus, the Son of God, is equal to the Father in his deity, nevertheless he submits himself to the leadership of the Father. Everywhere Jesus went he said, “I always do the things which please my Father.” He voluntarily consented to take a lower place.

Even in the Trinity there is a created order. All creation has order. It is not just women who are to submit; everyone is accountable. And to resist the created order is to make life miserable. You can never violate God's natural created order without hurting yourself. Just as there are physical laws that you cannot violate without being hurt, so there are moral laws. We violate them to our own destruction.

Now it is from those two headships that we come to an understanding of the meaning of the central one: “Man is the head of the woman.” Paul is not saying that every man is the head of every woman. He is speaking of a one-man, one-woman, a husband-wife relationship. We exercise our headship the way Jesus exercised his. We must not stomp around demanding that everyone immediately obey the master's voice. We must not pout because we don't get our way. We are not free to do as we please, insisting that everyone follow our plans. We are subject to the Lord. When a man understands that he must be submissive to Jesus Christ, and that he must take his model for leadership from Christ himself, then he will understand the balance he must maintain as a leader.

We are told in Genesis that when man was created, he was given the responsibility to bring the earth under his control. He was to serve it, to care for it, to protect it, but not to exploit it. And God

made Eve to be his helpmate, i.e. she was someone just like him, someone to share in his responsibility. She was his colleague, not his slave. Her submission to “her man,” her husband, was voluntary, carried out because she believed that was God’s best for her life. In servant leadership and voluntary submission therefore we have two beautiful pictures of God’s pattern of relationships.

Now this fundamental pattern of relationships, according to Paul, was to be clearly reflected in public worship. Thus what people looked like and how they dressed was relevant. There were to be no distractions. Christians were to demonstrate what God had done in Christ—setting them free to serve and worship him. Christian women were to keep their heads covered because otherwise there would be a substantial degree of distraction. Covering her head was sign of a woman’s submission. This was true in the secular community. In Paul’s mind there was no reason to drop that convention inside the church. If she did, the woman was behaving like a slave or an adulteress. F. F. Bruce comments, “There is nothing frivolous about such an appeal to public conventions of seemliness. To be followers of the crucified Jesus was in itself unconventional enough, but needless breaches of convention were to be discouraged.”

Notice that the woman has an equal ministry in terms of prayer and prophecy. But Paul says that she ought to keep her head covered so there will be no distractions to their freedom to worship. According to his line of argument, if a Christian woman became so uninhibited in public worship that she dispensed with the outward symbol of her submission, then she ought to shave her head and thus all at once remove the distracting impact of her “crowning glory.” But that is not a Christian way to behave. Thus Paul exhorts her to practice self-control, especially when she feels so moved by the Spirit in prayer that she is tempted to throw all her inhibitions to the wind.

The force of Paul’s argument from creation in verse 3 is that God did not make one principle of divine action only to change it later.

The apostle now moves on to give the purpose for this divine pattern.

## II. A Divine Purpose: The Glory of God (11:7-10)

**For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. (11:7-10)**

In the same way that Christian worship should reflect the divinely ordained pattern of relationships, so it should reflect the fact that we have been created to give glory to God (10:31). We were made in God’s image so that any creature observing us would see the likeness and nature of God. Man is the visible expression of the invisible God. “Glory” indicates weight or value. What the world needs to see is the character of God lived out in our lives in the world. That is why we were created: we are an instrument through whom God wants to display his character, so that when people look at us they see the worth of God. Therefore a man should not wear a veil because that glory is to be openly and publicly manifested. That is our true dignity.

Paul goes on to say that “the woman is the glory of man.” In other words, the woman is the highest expression of the man’s worth. He is not saying that women ought to do whatever men tell them and

then they will be his glory. He is saying that the woman is to reflect man’s highest hopes, ambitions and character. In terms of character women ought to be the most beautiful of creatures. When we honor women and treat them with dignity, not as second class citizens, but joint heirs, then that is what they will reflect. But when we abuse them and treat them as sexual objects, then that is what they will reflect. In general, in any society women glorify their men. Women live as they think their men want them to live. Now fortunately there are exceptions. There are women who have a higher goal in life—to please God, and to live in accordance with his expectations and view of them. But in general, women in any society glorify their men. I believe this is what Paul means when he says that “the woman is the glory of man.”

He goes on to further explain his point on the purpose of the woman’s creation: “For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake.” Woman was taken from man that she might fully share his nature. Men and women are not two different kinds of beings. They have differences, but they have the same basic nature. Woman was made to help man achieve the goals given him by God. In that sense she is indeed man’s better half. It is important to state that man was made in the image of God before the two sexes were separated. And they are both included when it says that man was made in the image of God. We read in Genesis 5:2, “He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them ‘man.’” The image of God is therefore to be seen only in the full complementary of male and female.

I must admit that I am not exactly sure what Paul is referring to when he exhorts women to have this authority on their head while they are ministering in the public worship service, “because of the angels.” The Scripture tells us in a number of passages that angels are observers of church order. They understand this order in the creation (in fact they were God’s agents in the work of creation); and they understand the principle of headship. Isaiah 6 indicates that the angels veil their faces when they worship before the throne of God. It may be the apostle’s point that the angels are concerned to preserve the worship of humans from any practice that would deny the distinctives which the sexes are to manifest.

We have already seen in this letter how important it is to balance truth, and so Paul breaks his argument on the distinctiveness of men and women by going on to talk about their equality.

## III. A Divine Perspective: The Nature of Humanity (11:11-16)

### A. Redemption teaches the equality of men and women (11:11-12)

**However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. (11:11-12)**

The apostle has been arguing strongly that wives should submit to their husbands, and for that attitude to be demonstrated whenever God’s people gather to worship. Here he argues with just as much force that the two are one in Christ, totally bound up with each other, inseparable and inter-dependent. There is no inferiority involved. No matter what society has done to reduce women to lower status, nevertheless “in the Lord” the original intent of God is restored. Though distinct as sexes, they are equal as persons. Both man and woman owe their existence to God.

In verses 13-16, Paul gives us a second perspective.

## B. Nature itself teaches the uniqueness of men and women (11:13-16)

**Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God. (11:13-16)**

Paul brings this somewhat complex discussion to a conclusion by arguing not from Scripture, but from nature and intuition. I would not argue like this, but Paul is an inspired apostle, and he can argue any way he wants! Precisely how culturally universal this actually is may be difficult to answer, but his major point is clear: God has made men and women different, so *vive la difference!*

Nature itself teaches us that a woman should have a covering. God has from the very beginning created women with beautiful hair, and the length of the hair is itself a covering. But length of hair is a relative thing, and sadly, this passage has been used to exclude men with long hair from worship services. But this is not a prohibition against long hair as such. When Paul wrote this letter, men wore their hair much longer than they do today. The apostle's point is that intuitively, as a general rule, women wear their hair longer than men.

There is no doubt that there are many cultural conventions when it comes to masculine and feminine roles, and jobs and rights which need to be revised or rejected. As Creator, however, God intends that men and women should have different, but complementary functions.

This principle will keep us from going overboard and being squeezed into the world's mode in their attempt to make us swallow an androgynous lifestyle. In the recent past there has been a blurring of all distinctions between the genders in professions—in fashion, in human interaction, etc. We see it glorified in pop culture, where Madonna and Michael Jackson play the gender-blending game for profit.

I exhort you teenagers to be careful. Madonna's "Blonde Ambition" tour bent every sexual stereotype in the book. Michael Jackson has remodeled his body and his voice, which has now become the model for modern music. Melodies have moved higher and higher until most men can't sing them. This movement toward unisex is more than bad taste; it is an assault on a basic truth of creation: that God created two distinct types of people—male and female, masculine and feminine—with different roles and abilities, for the propagation and nurturing of the race. When we destroy such distinctions and reject gender as anti-egalitarian, we are undermining God's created order—and we do it to our own destruction.

What is this passage saying to us? Surely it is not saying that women should wear hats in church. God wants men and women to dress normally and naturally in Christian worship. And a veil is no longer a symbol of a woman's submission to her husband. The issue is not what you wear on your head; it is, what is in your hearts? Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. The reality, not the symbol, is what counts.

One important role in ministry for a woman—it may even be the highest, is through the birth and rearing of her children. I am distressed by the denigration we hear today of the women's role in the home. Now I don't think it is wrong for a woman to work outside the home, nor do I believe it is wrong for a woman to pursue a career, but God wants both men and women to know that our families are our top priority. It is easy for a gifted, talented, highly educated woman to begin to think that there must be something more noble for her to do than change diapers. But what balances out those tasks that all of us would rather delegate is the unique place women occupy in the scheme of things as they mold and shape the character of their children. Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold by making you think that that is beneath you. There is no greater task than bringing a boy or girl into the world and training them to be godlike.

Men, understand your responsibility as the head of your home. Quit being so passive and learn how to be a servant leader. Stop leaving everything up to your wives. Care about your families as you care about your careers. Stop barking out orders and expecting everyone to jump when you speak. Begin to model quietly the truth you long for your family to know. Learn your wives' and children's needs and begin serving and praying for them.

Women, stop competing with your husbands. Learn to complement the men God has given to you. Learn to creatively give them your support and encouragement.

A number of years ago, Ray Stedman shared a quotation from the well known author Taylor Caldwell. It was taken from an interview where she was asked if a certain movie production she was working on would bring her satisfaction. Although I am not advocating everything she says, I think her reply was a powerful statement. Here is what she said:

There is no solid satisfaction in any career for a woman like myself. There is no home, no true freedom, no hope, no joy, no expectation for tomorrow, no contentment. I would rather cook a meal for a man and...feel myself in the protection of his arms than all the citations and awards and honors I have received worldwide, including the Ribbon of the Legion of Honor and my property and my bank accounts. They mean nothing to me. And I am only one among the millions of sad women like myself.

We need to take stock of our understanding of God's plan for us as men and women. Let us submit ourselves to that, so that the world may see the glory of God reflected in lives that honor and glorify him.

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