

The Church That Tried Gender-Fluid Worship

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Date: 27 August 2023

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] The reading is from 1 Corinthians chapter 11 and reading from verse 2, page 1152 in the Church Bibles.

So page 1152, 1 Corinthians chapter 11 and starting from verse 2. I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I pass them on to you.

But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ and the head of the woman is man and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head.

But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head. It is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off.

But if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God.

[1 : 24] But woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.

It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.

For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. Judge for yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

Does it not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him? But that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory.

For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice, nor do the churches of God. This is the word of the Lord.

[2 : 28] Good morning, St. Silas. If we have not met, I am Martin Ayers. I am the lead pastor here.

It would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bible open at that passage. Thanks, Graham, for reading that for us. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you would find that helpful as we look at this together.

It is a great thing to do, to have as a regular diet as a church, that we work through books of the Bible, chapter by chapter, because it means that we don't just miss out bits that we wouldn't otherwise have chosen.

And maybe we wouldn't have chosen this one for a while if we were just choosing our favorite bits of the Bible. But it's all God's word. We give thanks for it. We trust the goodness of God's word.

So let's pray and ask for God's help as we turn to it. Heavenly Father and gracious and mighty God, we praise you and thank you for your wisdom, your power, your grace.

[3 : 26] We ask that this morning you will open our ears to hear your voice, open our minds to understand, and open our hearts to respond rightly to you.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. If you've come as a guest today, we're a church all about Jesus. And God brought you here today to visit church.

Maybe you've not been to church ever before. And in God's sovereignty, you came today when we're looking at this topic of men and women. And we're not actually a church that talks about these kind of topics very often.

But we will do when they come up in the Bible. And we're a church committed to trusting the goodness of God's word. And what I'd want to sort of urge you not to do is to think, as you look at this, something like this.

Jesus can't be the Son of God because I disagree with what the Bible says about men and women. I think that would be a foolish thing for us to think.

[4 : 30] Because behind saying something like that would be an assumption that we've got everything right morally in our culture. You know, if you look at all through history and into the future, every generation of humanity, and all around the world, all the different cultures, and all the different views about right and wrong, that somehow in Glasgow in the 2020s, we've arrived at the position of moral superiority so that we won't allow God to speak in and correct us.

And instead of that, I think it's good for us to think we could have the humility to accept that if God is the God of all space and time, he will have things to say to any culture that will correct them.

And we want to allow God to disagree with us because he has the right to do that. He made us. We've talked before here at St. Silas about the, there was a movie, *The Stepford Wives*, some years ago where there were some guys who got fed up of having wives that disagree with them.

So they swapped their wives for robots that were just programmed just to say, yes, dear, whenever they spoke to them. And it doesn't work because then there was just no relationship.

Because there was no to and fro between the husband and the wife. In a similar way, we don't want to have a Stepford God who we just fashioned in our image just to say yes and affirm everything.

[5 : 59] We want to listen to the true God who reveals himself and allow him to correct us in his goodness. And we could also say that teaching about what it means to be a man and a woman has never been more needed by a culture than for our culture today.

We could say that our culture is in crisis when we think about men and women. People talk about gender identity, about culture wars that include issues of manhood and womanhood.

We are familiar with the term toxic masculinity. And people talk about patriarchy, where they're describing societies where men hold the power and women are excluded from it.

And we know there are issues all around us with men abusing power. Women's sport this week, last Sunday, triumphant Spanish women's team.

All week, the news hasn't been about how good they were. It's been about the head of the Spanish FA because he inappropriately kissed one of the female players on the lips without her consent.

[7 : 06] We've had horrific stories in the news this week of women being abused by men, even by misogynistic men who have huge followings online.

At the same time, it's been pointed out that we're raising boys in our culture to know there are kinds of masculinity they have to avoid, but we don't give them a positive vision of what's the alternative.

Is there a positive way to be a man? In a recent survey in the news, one 16-year-old boy, Joel, said, if people don't have anything positive to say about masculinity, then we are just stranded.

And in my newspaper, one of the writers, Hugo Rifkind, recently wrote an article, How Should Men Behave in an Age of Me Too? And he wrote this. He said, What does it mean to say that we should educate men?

With my daughters, I know what the positive message is. You can do whatever boys can do and more. With boys, though, I'm lost, and I've been one for a while now.

[8 : 10] So are men exactly the same as women? Or are they different and need to be told to become more like women? Is there a positive view of being a man? On the other side, what does it mean to be a woman?

Lots of women say that it's harder than ever to know how to flourish as a woman in the world. And this summer, we've had this epic cultural moment, the Barbie movie.

And in the Barbie movie, Ken is really fed up in the movie because he feels devalued and overlooked and powerless. And my understanding from listening to women talk about what the film means is that the film is portraying Ken like that to display what it's like to be a woman in some traditional cultures where it feels oppressive and devaluing when your significance is reduced to things like whether or not your spouse has looked at you today and whether they've spoken to you.

And you become defined by how you relate to that one person, your spouse. So you have this portrayal in the movie of what it's like to be a woman in a traditional culture as oppressive.

But then in more liberal cultures, people, women, can feel destabilized and exhausted by the sense of while they're given freedom, there's this need to prove themselves.

[9 : 32] And in the Barbie movie, Gloria epitomizes this with her speech where she says that women just can't win. She says it is literally impossible to be a woman. You have to be thin but not too thin and you can never see you want to be thin.

You're supposed to love being a mother but don't talk about your kids all the time. You have to be a career woman but also always looking out for other people. You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never show fear, never fail, never get out of line.

It's too hard. I'm tired of watching myself and every other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. So we're lost, aren't we?

We're confused. What does God say to help us with manhood and womanhood? Well, this is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church he's planted some years before in the city of Corinth and it's good to remember that as Christianity has arrived in this city, Corinth and around that part of the world, just in that first generation, a revolution is underway.

The church, the saved people of God have grasped that everyone is created equally by God in his image, male and female and that in Christ, everyone is saved equally when we come to God.

[10 : 54] There is neither slave nor free, as Paul writes elsewhere, there's neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female. We're all one in Christ Jesus and that is revolutionary in the first century Roman world.

When you look about what the Bible says about men and women, it says far more about what we have in common than it does about our differences. It's good to remember that. But it looks as though in Corinth, because of this wonderful, glorious oneness in Christ, some people were then throwing off the normal cultural markers of gender difference and Paul is correcting that.

in this part of his letter. So we've got two simple points and then some implications. Our first point, our longest point, men and women are different.

Let's look together at verse three. Paul says, but I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ and the head of the woman is man and the head of Christ is God.

Now when Paul uses the word man, as our footnotes show us in the pew Bibles, the church Bibles, all through the passage, in the original language, one of the difficulties we have is that it's the same word for man as husband and for woman as wife.

[12 : 14] And when you're reading that kind of Greek, it's only the context that helps you understand whether it's talking about husband and wife or man and woman. So as you read it, for my money, I think the ESV translation is probably right that in verses four and five, it's better to read what he says about men as husbands and women as wives at that point.

And that's possibly true in verse three here as well. We also don't know whether it was the cultural norm for, in the first century Roman world, for all women to cover their heads or whether it was just wives, whether it was something that you did when you got married as a woman to cover your head.

We don't know that. And that's okay. I don't think we need to know that. I think we're going to see that. Because what I think we're seeing here is the reason there is this, perhaps there's an ambiguity here in Paul's writing between getting principles about husbands and wives and applying them more generally is because he wants to take those principles that are principally displayed in a marriage relationship with the different roles of husband and wife.

And he's using those and deriving from those principles about differences in gender so that it's not as though if you're a single man or woman, you behave in a kind of gender neutral way until you get married and suddenly you then have this gender role.

Rather, he's taking principles about masculinity and femininity from the principal idea of the marriage relationship. So, verse three, we could read it as the head of every man is Christ and the head of the wife is her husband and the head of Christ is God.

[14 : 02] And I think that would be a helpful way of clarifying that there are plenty of single women who are not under the headship of one man because they're not married to a man. What does it mean that the husband is the head?

Well, Paul is giving us two pictures there in that verse three. The picture that the head of every man is Christ. I think that helps us because it makes clear that with this idea of the husband being the head of his wife, there is responsibility as Christ had for the church.

And I think that there is authority because Christ has authority over the church. But it could never justify being overbearing or domineering for the example is Christ's relationship with the church, his people.

And when Paul writes to address husbands in a different letter, Ephesians chapter five, he takes on that example and points out to husbands that every ounce of Jesus' authority over his people, he spent in sacrificial love, laying down his life for the good of his people, for the church.

He gave himself up. He laid down his life because he did it to love the church, his bride, and so that the church would flourish. And so in the way that husbands are to be the head of their wives, they are to be like Jesus in his sacrificial love.

[15 : 29] So that's the model of a husband's headship that every husband is called to with the responsibility that God gives to him. And when a husband is able to be that kind of head, I take it that his wife is able to flourish as she can joyfully submit to his loving sacrificial leadership.

Now the second picture there, just in verse three again, of headship, is the picture of God himself that he says the head of Christ is God. And that's very good for us because it reminds us that different roles do not bring with them different value.

Within the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Father sends the Son into the world to save us. We see Christ, certainly the incarnate Christ, delighting in doing the will of his Father.

He's come to do his Father's will. He tells us that. So he never resents his role as the Son. He's never grasping for the Father's role and saying, this isn't fair. I should be allowed to be the Father.

He delights in being the Son of the Father. And after he ascends to be with the Father, he asks the Father to send the Spirit. He tells us that in John's Gospel.

[16 : 47] So the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are fully God, but within their relationships, there is authority in their different roles as well as mutual love. And in the same way, men and women can have different roles in marriage and different roles in church life, but still be equally valuable to God and made in God's image.

So Paul now moves on to the specific cultural application of the principle. And we get that in verse 4. If we just have a look. Verse 4.

Every man who, or husband, every husband who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife or woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.

It's the same as having her head shaved. So in Corinth, evidently, just from what we can see there, it was probably women and not men who were, who would normally have covered their heads in the culture.

And it seems that it would have been a mark that a wife was under the authority of her husband in Corinthian culture. And Paul is directing the church not to throw off that cultural expression of maleness and femaleness.

[18 : 07] Notice, though, that women should exercise their gifts in church. Paul expects that women, in verse 5, will pray and prophesy in church.

He wants them to exercise those gifts as women rather than, which they may have been doing, taking off their head coverings as though that would actually be a way culturally of saying, we're the same as men now so we can exercise our gifts as men do.

Paul is saying they don't need to do that because women can pray and prophesy and they should do that as women. So, you know, it's different too.

Sometimes, in our society, women are told that if they want to occupy the spaces currently dominated by men in society, they need to become more masculine and do those things in a kind of manly way.

Whereas Paul is saying here, women should pray and prophesy as women rather than losing their femininity to exercise the gifts in church.

[19 : 13] And then Paul gives us reasons for these gender distinctions. And what we see in the passage is that maleness and femaleness are rooted in God's design at creation.

Before sin entered the world, which has spoiled relationships, God designed men and women to be equal but with different roles in Genesis chapter 2.

So, we see that in verse 7 here. A man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God but woman is the glory of man.

So, he's pointing us back here to Genesis chapter 2. Men and women both made in the image of God. All humanity is made in God's image. But here, the language he's using is because God created the man first in Genesis 2 and he gives him responsibility over the garden, kind of dominion over the garden passed on to him from God.

He's made to be this kind of glorious representation of God in the world. But then in Genesis 2, God says something is not good for the first time and it's that it's not good for man to be alone.

[20 : 26] In other words, man on his own is inadequate for the task of displaying the glory of God in the world. And so, God creates woman and she's described by Paul here in verse 7 as the glory of man.

I think because in Genesis 2, when she's created, Adam wakes from his sleep and he sings with joy over the woman saying, at last, here is one who is like me and yet different in wonderful ways.

And Paul reiterates that order in verses 8 and 9 here in the passage. Man didn't come from woman but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman but woman for man.

So, woman created out of man to be his helper and his delight. And then, in verse 10, Paul says, it is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head because of the angels.

I think that's the most difficult verse in the passage. I think it probably means that she should have a sign of authority over her own head because I think it's probably a parallel of verse 7 and it could mean a sign.

[21 : 35] We have that in the footnote. And then, because of the angels, that might be because Paul wants us to see that the whole context of these instructions are when we gather to worship God as the church and when we do that, we join with the angels who are worshipping God in heaven.

So, in a sense, they are the kind of guardians of worship and they are concerned for the holiness of God, things being done right for a holy God. And the final reason that Paul gives for these gender differences to be expressed, he appeals in verses 13 to 16 to what he calls the very nature of things.

So, that's our first point. Men and women are different. And our second point is just as important but it's actually really brief. Okay? It's men and women are interdependent and we see that in verse 11 if you have a look.

Nevertheless, Paul says, in the Lord, woman is not independent of man nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman but everything comes from God.

In other words, though he's just said from Genesis 2 the first woman came from the man, it is just as true that every man since has been born of a woman including the Messiah.

[22 : 54] Every man has been born from a woman. The Savior of the world is actually the only man who's ever been born who didn't have a human dad in fact conceived of the Holy Spirit born of the Virgin Mary.

And Paul wants us to see from verse 11 that men and women depend on each other. So it's no good for a man to think because I have this headship role in home life and family life and the church I can manage without women.

And it's no good for a woman to think what women need is just to get rid of men to push men out and take over these spaces that are currently occupied by men because we do a better job without men around.

God's design is for male and female to be equal in dignity but different and complementary and that we would appreciate and value those differences in one another as we flourish together in the church.

So we're going to think about some implications that are on the sheet for you. The first is gender differences are real and a gift from God. And this is truth we need to hear in our culture.

[24 : 11] It lays the platform for a positive vision of being a godly man and being a godly woman. In the goodness of God's word we find that men and women are equal and men and women are different.

And knowing that God has made us male and female is liberating. All around us in Scotland today there is confusion about that. There is confusion about gender and because gender differences are expressed differently in different cultures the philosophy has grown of saying well the whole thing is just cultural.

It's just a social invention. So it's common for people to say and to teach today that though your sex is determined by your physical anatomy and by the chromosomes in every cell in your body male and female that gender is something different and that's decided by your brain by what you feel would be true to yourself.

And so people then argue that you can vary and mould your gender like there's a plasticity to your gender and there is lots of sadness around us among people and there's lots of suffering around us as people wrestle with feelings that they are uncomfortable with the male body that they have or the female body that they have.

And we want to have deep compassion for people who are suffering like that who feel that kind of sadness and discomfort in their lives. The solution that our society is offering is to minimise gender differences and just encourage children to think that they can choose whichever they feel comfortable with.

[25 : 54] So our kids primary school they've just won this gold award for being a gender neutral school with a gender neutral school uniform and they allow the children to go by the pronoun of their choosing he can be she she can be they and so on and instead of a head girl and a head boy which they used to have they just have head children now so it's looking for ways to try and erase out differences between the genders in the school while online on the social media platform Tumblr today you can choose from well over a hundred genders as you register on that social media platform you can see your gender fluid which is saying that your gender shifts day by day moment by moment you can see your non-binary which is rejecting the idea that there are two genders gender queer so neither male nor female or you can say you're a demigirl or a demiboy which is where you're saying that I identify partially as a girl or partially as a boy and in the midst of that we're seeing a lot of pain and distress about gender and as part of our compassion towards people in their suffering and their confusion we find here that it is good that God tells us that he made us male and female that is a good thing that our maleness and femaleness they're based on the sex revealed by the DNA in our bodies and whether God has made you male or female it is a good gift from him the next implication is that gender differences should be expressed clearly and culturally so this is where we might ask the question so should women wear head coverings today in church and not many of you women are wearing them this morning but it's more common in Scotland than you might think looking around this church this morning there are various

Presbyterian churches in Scotland and some Brethren churches and some regions of the Highlands and Islands where it's still it's common for women to wear head coverings in church should we be doing that I think we should be respectful that where women are wearing a head covering and if there are women who wear them here because they feel more comfortable with that that we should be assuming these are women trying to take God's word seriously here and that's a good thing but I don't think women should do that in Scotland today the reason that Christian women were being told in Corinth to do it was that it clearly had a cultural meaning in Corinth but wearing a hat or a head covering in Scotland today doesn't mean anything like that so it doesn't carry with it the same meaning to wear one and not to wear one instead we might ask where are there cultural markers of being male and female in Glasgow today that we as Christians can use to show that we celebrate the gift from God of gender difference in how we dress we shouldn't dress as Christians in a way that would confuse people as to what gender we are so don't disguise your gender or deny your gender but look to embrace it and express it in culturally appropriate ways next implication men and women are both vital to church life we need each other so looking at this passage and the assumptions here about men and women worshipping together and using gifts together it's not a healthy pattern in church to have the men doing all the prayer and all the word ministry and decision making while the women are kind of in the background just baking and serving the tea it's a real blessing in our church that we have women as well as men on the staff team

I think that's brilliant and in the wider ministry team across our church where we look to all be involved in ministry we have women doing all kinds of ministry core leading bible study groups we've got women on our vestry the board of trustees we've got women involved in music ministry evangelistic ministries youth ministry children's ministry and in all those areas we flourish as God's people when men and women are serving together the next implication men have a responsibility to lead now that doesn't mean that women have to be retiring shy stay at home but for men looking at this language of being the head especially in a marriage we can married men take up a responsibility to lead our wives and our families especially spiritually I think of an older Christian lady who said to me in my church prayer meeting it feels to the women as though it's always the women who pray up and we'd love to hear more of the men just stepping up and leading us in prayer so not saying that she wants the women not to pray but it's just encouraging to hear the men taking that responsibility now leading like Jesus will mean leading sacrificially and servant heartedly for the good of others not for ourselves what would that look like it could be as men setting that example of coming into church looking to serve and encourage being willing being ambitious for the gospel and for those of us who are husbands and dads are there ways that you can look to set a pace spiritually at home that would mean that your wife is happy to follow behind she doesn't feel like she's always having to get out in front and pull you along with her but you've set a pace so that she can gladly follow your lead

I know what it's like to get home from a busy day weary and what I want to do is just lie on the sofa and for everyone to go away what does it look like in that context to muster some energy and go and be the one who wants to open the Bible with each child before bedtime and sit and pray with them and read the Bible with them in a way that communicates to them that I don't resent this because this is this is what God made us for and saved us for this is a special time even if I'm a bit knackered as men are there ways that we can look to take on that responsibility and lastly for all of us just to say that this teaching about gender differences is an opportunity for us to submit to God if we feel we disagree with God's word here this is a chance to show that he has the right to be God and we'll let him do that we'll take him at his word that's ultimately what submission is about that men and women boys and girls are to submit to the Lord we're called to submit ourselves to Jesus and as we do that we see in him the perfect example of submission as he submitted to the will of his father did Jesus lose his dignity by taking a submissive role a subordinate role to his father no his submission was an expression of his courage and his greatness and his righteousness and for any of us who feel that it's especially difficult for us to submit to the teaching we've heard this morning let's remember as we come to the Lord's table together that the one we submit to is also the one we can trust with all the hurt and confusion we carry he promises through the prophet

Isaiah that he won't break a bruised reed and we remember now with bread and wine that he laid down his life so that he can welcome us and be our gentle saviour and leader amen we're going to sing together in response to God's word before we come to the Lord's table so Catherine and the band will lead us