



## Headship Under Christ the King

[1 Cor 11:1-16](#)

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When was the last time you had culture shock? All of us have experienced it to one degree or another. E.g. Moving from middle school to high school. Or getting a new supervisor at work, or changing employers, especially leaving one company and going to work for your competitor. Moving to a new city. The point is that we all know what it's like to be somewhat disoriented and anxious in a new environment, struggling to assimilate to the new culture while also being from time to time disturbed and offended by it.

Welcome to the Christian life. We live in two worlds. We are, as Jesus says, "in the world but not of it." As Christians we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. But we are also resident aliens here, in a pagan culture, where we have been sent as Christ's ambassadors. What makes it so difficult is that we grew up here, on foreign soil, where God's kingship is contested. This is all we have ever known. And so often we feel more affinity with pagan culture than with that of the Kingdom of God.

This means that for those of us who are Christians, ***we are living in a state of constant, two-way culture shock***. From time-to-time we are horrified and offended by the values and practices of the pagan culture in which we live. And then perhaps just as frequently we are shocked and disturbed by the culture of the Kingdom of God.

That, I'm afraid, is how many of us feel when we come to 1 Cor 11, or any of the other dozens of biblical passages affirming male headship in the home and in the church. Our pagan culture says that the highest good is equality, regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, or sexual orientation. Then we come to the Scriptures where discrimination is everywhere, and many of us would prefer full citizenship here outside of God's Kingdom.

### Is 1 Cor 11 a Mistake?

None of this comes as a surprise to Jesus, who said, "I have come that you might have abundant life" (John 10:10). All of the OT promises of sight for the blind, healing for the lame, food for the hungry find their fulfillment in Jesus. He is the Messiah, the deliverer, who brings freedom from oppression. Jesus said, "If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you *free*" (John 8:32).

Think about what we always say in worship after hearing the Bible read: "Thanks be to God." Do you mean it when you say it? Do you believe that the Word of God brings life and light and freedom, for those who are willing to live according to it? All of us who are Christians know this to be true in other areas, why do we doubt it here? ***The Bible teaches that gender roles and differences are a means of freedom rather than oppression.*** Why is this dismissed out of hand?

So what are we to do with 1 Cor 11? There are those who say that Paul is simply wrong here. He's a good theologian elsewhere, but in this he made a mistake. Yet to say this is a bigger mistake, because Paul teaches something very similar in Ephesians and Colossians and Timothy and Titus. Do we rule out those passages too? Do we also exclude what Peter says along the same lines, as well as the words of Jesus in the Gospels? Who gave us authority to decide what parts of Scripture ought to be followed and what parts ought to be discarded?

There are those who say that this passage is unclear. I think this is a mistake as well. This passage was understood with perfect clarity for the better part of twenty centuries of Christian history. Perhaps difficult to practice, but never difficult to understand until the late 20<sup>th</sup> C. It's only "unclear" because it is so contrary to the values of our culture. (If only it were about wearing hats to church! Then it would be so much simpler!!!)

There are those who say that this passage is unimportant. Paul has just addressed the weighty topics of marriage, sexuality, and idolatry. He will soon talk about the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection. Do you really think Paul took a moment in the middle of this great epistle to be petty over what men and women wear to church? There must be more at stake here.

The alternative is that Paul is telling the truth when he says that Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, knocked him off his high horse, and commissioned him as an Apostle to the pagans, i.e. to people like us. Paul was sent as Jesus' emissary to us for cultural transformation, to help us recognize sinful and idolatrous patterns from our former way of life, to unlearn our bad habits, and then to learn a new way of living in Christ.

### **Paul's Ministry of Enculturation (1 Cor 11:1-2)**

This is why Paul says again in 1 Cor 11:1, "Follow me," imitate me, mimic me, as I imitate Christ. He said this once before in 1 Cor 4:15-17, where he described himself as their Father in Christ. He then went on to encourage them to maintain the traditions he passed along to them through Timothy. Here again, in 11:2, Paul says the same thing when he commends the Corinthians for keeping the tradition that he has handed down to them.

We need this same ministry in our own lives, too! All of us have been thoroughly indoctrinated by the principalities and powers of this age. We bring

all of this indoctrination into the Christian life with us. We must unlearn it, and learn a new way of living as Christians.

Yet few things are more offensive to us than to be told that we must change, particularly if that change means breaking with the patterns of the world. The only way we are ever really going to grow as Christians is to put an end to our self-righteousness and admit that we are thoroughly indoctrinated by the world. Then we need this longsuffering ministry of transformation, renewing our minds and changing out actions, so that we no longer walk in darkness, conformed to the patterns of this world, but rather live as children of the light.

Paul commended the Corinthians insofar as they were being faithful to the tradition that he had passed on to them. We have this tradition delivered to us in the Scriptures, including this passage here in 1 Cor 11. Are we being faithful too?

### **The Church's Org Chart (1 Cor 11:3, 11-12)**

Here's the main point of this passage: it's an overview of the church's Organizational Chart. There is a hierarchy of headship: Father→Son→Husbands (men)→Wives (women). (The word for man/husband is interchangeable, and same for woman/wife. It was essentially one and the same in the Corinthian context.)

It's clear that what Paul is teaching here is about organization, not valuation. This is not quarters→dimes→nickels→pennies. Rather, its about roles and responsibilities. How do we know?

Paul affirms here and elsewhere in 1 Cor that men and women are mutually dependent upon one another. Read 11:11-12. Also 1 Cor 7:3-5, where Paul spoke of mutual stewardship over one another's bodies in marriage. Paul would never have said these things if he believed women were somehow stupid or inferior.

Jesus is "functionally subordinate" to the Father, yet equal in being. Phil 2: Jesus possessed equality with his Father, but he submitted to the Father and humbled himself to the point of death for our sakes. Is Jesus inferior because of his submission to the Father? Of course not. The opposite case can be made. Likewise, wives are not inferior to their husbands. There is subordination in function, but not in being.

But why is this important? Thankfully we have Eph 5:21-33 to help us understand the Gospel rationale behind these roles. In Eph 5 Paul says that "the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church." He goes on to say that wives are to honor their husbands and the church honors Christ, and husbands are to sacrifice themselves in love for their wives as Christ did for the church. Ultimately, the way Christian husbands and wives treat one another models the good news of the Gospel to the entire world.

This is exactly what we learned back when we were in 1 Cor 7. Marriage is not primarily for us, to make us happy. Rather, marriage is about mission. Those of us who are called to be married are given this calling as God's mission for us, so that by way of teamwork we can be more faithful ambassadors.

### **Headship under Christ the King**

It's only in this context of Gospel mission that we can talk about male headship. Male headship is not about dominating women. It's precisely the opposite. Brothers, let me tell you what headship is about: it's about laying down your life for your bride. The goal of male headship is to be so Christlike in our character and actions that the world sees Jesus in us. If this is not your objective, then don't even think about getting married.

One of the main reasons this passage causes us so much grief is because we focus on wives submitting to their husbands, and we forget that this is only part of the "org chart" in this verse (11:3). Remember that the verse begins not with "the head of the wife is her husband" but with "the head of every man is Christ." This hierarchy must be crystal clear if headship is ever going to work. That's why it's so appropriate to be talking about this today, on Christ the King Sunday. Headship requires a spiritual ecosystem in which Christ is the King. Take him out of the equation and all hell breaks loose.

The same is true everywhere. Imagine being under enemy fire in Afghanistan, and finding out that your commanding officer is disobeying orders. "Uh oh. Whose side am I on? What do I do?" Or what if you see the police in your neighborhood taking bribes and selling drugs? "Uh oh. Time to buy a gun and form a militia." The whole system begins to fall apart as people take matters into their own hands.

This is why it should come as no surprise that many women in the church are so adamantly opposed to male headship. If the men will not submit to Christ as King, how can their wives possibly consider submission to them? If a church will not practice some kind of discipline, meaning getting involved in messy situations, calling sin 'sin,' holding people accountable when they are unrepentant, and eventually excommunicating those who willfully continue to sin, then what protection do people have against abusive spouses? Practically speaking, if I were part of a church that didn't practice discipline, then I would be a strong advocate for complete and total egalitarianism too.

But within a healthy spiritual ecosystem, not only is headship possible, it's what men and women want. Women in our church often tell me, "I'm so tired of men who want to go out for coffee and just hang out. What I want is for a man to take the lead, call me up and unashamedly say, 'I would like to take you out on a date.'" Without exception, the happiest people I know are those who have this thing worked out, all in submission to Christ the King.

Headship does not mean, by the way, that the man must be smarter and better than his wife in everything. No, it means that the man is the leader under submission to Christ. There are many examples of godly headship in this congregation in which the wife is the better businessman, the better historian, the better student, even the better theologian. What matters is that the man bears ultimately responsibility before the Lord.

### The Corinthian Coiffure

Before we work through the remaining verses, let me say something about the Corinthian context. Some say that this passage doesn't apply to us anymore, because we no longer live in a culture like Corinth. Nothing could be further from the truth. As it turns out, egalitarianism was on the rise in Roman Corinth too, for reasons similar to why it is on the rise in the church today. Men were misbehaving. Women were tired of being mistreated. And the ecosystem was breaking down.

At the Idol Feasts and other public gatherings there were women known as *hetairai*. Husbands would leave their wives at home, and then meet a *hetaira* at the Idol Feast, and she would be his companion for the evening. She engaged him in conversation, ate and drank with him, played instruments, sang poetry, and then had sex with him. The *hetairai* were very popular.

In the years preceding Paul's first visit to Corinth, the Roman wives began to take matters into their own hands. They began to assert themselves sexually, competing with the *hetairai* for popularity among the men. Plutarch warned that "those who are not cheerful in the company of their wives, nor join with them in sportiveness and laughter, are thus teaching them to seek their own pleasures apart from their husbands." (*Moralia* 140A.) (We learned in 1 Cor 5 of one such woman in the church who was sleeping with her stepson. )

So what does all of this have to do with hair, which seems to be so important throughout this passage?



Figure 1: Aspasia of Miletus, a veiled bride

1. Roman wives wore headcoverings to indicate that they were not available sexually, in the same way that men and women wear wedding rings in our culture. See Figure 1.

2. An uncovered, long, full head of hair on a woman was a sign of sexual availability.
3. It was also a sign of fertility. According to the medical lore of the day, long hair on a woman's head was instrumental in conception.
4. A woman found guilty of adultery would be shaved bald, to shame her, and also to render her infertile.
5. Men's hair was important too. At puberty, boys would have their long locks cut short, to indicate that they were now men.
6. Men with long hair were seen as effeminate and homosexuals.

There was only one time when certain men would cover their heads in Roman culture. The highest ranking officials would pull their toga up over their heads when they prayed and sacrificed to the Roman gods. They did so to demonstrate their high rank. To this day you can find busts and coins that show Emperors *capite velato*, to identify them as the high priest of the Roman Imperial cult. (See fig. 2) When a man in Corinth did this, he did it to say, "I'm a VIP, appointed by Caesar. Look at me."

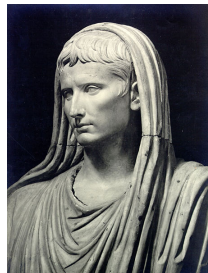


Figure 2: Caesar Augustus *capite velato*

So given the similarities between the Corinthian context and our own, it's easy to see why this passage is still relevant. But even if the contexts were radically different, it would still be relevant because it's the Word of God. Paul makes this clear in 11:16. This passage is for everyone. It is the universal practice of all the churches.

### **Drawing Attention to Ourselves, Shaming the Lord (11:4–6, 13–16)**

All of this hopefully explains why Paul says what he does here: You must not present yourself in worship as you would in pagan culture, because it says something tacky and untrue about you. Men must not behave like the Imperial officials, covering their heads, and strutting about. Like wearing White House staff blazer to church and expecting to be asked to make the decisions. Women must not behave as those in the sexual liberation, uncovering their heads and strutting about. Like taking off your wedding ring and coming to worship in a mini-skirt and low-cut blouse.

In 13–15, Paul uses the same language as he does in Rom 1, when he talks about homosexuality as something unnatural. Likewise, it is unnatural and inappropriate for a man to be effeminate in worship, or for a woman to behave

as a sex object. In other words, it is improper and wrong for us to try to fit into any role other than the one God intended for us.

Most of us spend way too much money and energy on image, trying to make more of a statement with our appearance than by our Christ-like behavior. Self-seeking behavior, no matter how culturally acceptable, dishonors God and thereby brings shame on us. On the other hand, propriety and modesty are important ways of honoring Christ as King. What are you saying about yourself and your Lord in your self-presentation?

### **Glorifying God with our Genders (11:7-10)**

Headship is not just something for the first century AD. It's a creation principle. God gave us gender roles before we fell into sin, which means that gender is something good. Gender is not a cultural construct! It is a blessing and a gift from the Lord. He made some of us male in his image, and some of us female in his image! When each of us takes the place God made for us, then God gets all the glory. This is the way it will be in the consummation. The dead in Christ will be raised, and we will have resurrection bodies, male and female in gender.

Now look at how all of this works. This is about a lot more than clothes. Brothers, when your wife and children are blessed, content, with spiritual protection and spiritual provision, then it makes you look good. And when their spiritual lives are a disaster, and yet your wife is still in submission to you, it shows you up.

What can you do about this? Go off and pout? Beat her and the children? Don't you dare. Turn around and put your eyes on Jesus. If you had been looking at him, chances are none of this would have happened. Remember, you are part of a larger spiritual ecosystem.

Ladies, if you're getting serious with a guy who isn't fully in submission to Jesus, then you need to break up with him. Ask any pastor what's the most common prayer request he receives from the wives in the church. "Please, pastor, pray that my husband will become the spiritual leader in our home." Don't become another statistic because you thought he would get his act together after you got married.

Nobody knows for certain what Paul means by mentioning the angels here, but I tend to think that they are present in our worship services for the same reason they are present at the east gate of Eden, and in God's throne room, and in so many other places in Scripture. They are God's bouncers. They keep order, to make sure that God gets the glory in worship. And so I think what Paul is saying here is that when a wife takes off her wedding ring and struts in worship, she is stealing glory from God. If you could see the angels in our midst, you wouldn't want to do that.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the point of this passage is not to require our women to wear hats. In summary we can say:

- ♦ Gender is a gift from God. Male headship is a gift from God. Apart from sin, it would have been a beautiful thing.
- ♦ Sin ruined gender relationships. Ever since sin came into the world, it has been every man for himself, every woman for herself. Egalitarianism is necessary because the world is broken.
- ♦ We bring these expectations into the church and into the home.
- ♦ God sent his Son, Jesus, who died in our place, and was raised to new life in a right relationship with God.
- ♦ Whenever we put our trust in Jesus, he puts us in right relation with God and with one another.
- ♦ Jesus invites us to trust him to rebuild the spiritual ecosystem in which headship makes sense. He promises to redeem relationships in the church and in the home so that men can be men and women can be women in the ways that God intended.
- ♦ Whenever we trust him in this way, we no longer have to worry about our rights or our status. We find our identity in him, and it enables us to put the needs of others before ourselves.
- ♦ Whenever we trust him in this way, our lives testify to the love of Christ and God gets all the glory.

Are you willing to follow him in this way?