

Unisex: God's Glory Through Human Gender in Culture

1 Corinthians 11:11-16

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Review of Last Week's Message

For several reasons, I need to begin today with a little review of last week. The first is that the passage is one of the most culturally difficult to understand in the Bible. It was written to a culture separated from ours by 2000 years. We worked through it, but this week there's more of it so I want to make sure it's fresh in our minds. Also, every week we have guests and visitors who weren't here last week. Without a review, today's passage in the Bible is going to sound very strange. It did to us last week when we first read it. Often the Bible is straightforward and easy to understand. Sometimes it is not. We don't cherry pick the easy ones and avoid the hard ones. We believe all of it is inspired and profitable to us, even if some of it is a little tough.

Much of the challenge here is how different the culture of the New Testament is from ours. We talked last week about the difference between cultural truth and universal truth. Many passages require identifying whether something is exclusive to that culture or whether it transcends time and culture and is applicable to us today.

So we come to 1 Corinthians 11 and it talks about how women ought to wear head coverings and men shouldn't wear head coverings. Is that a cultural or universal truth? In that day, all women wore a shawl over their head. That's just the way it was. A woman not wearing one was signaling she was either a prostitute, mistress, or a woman wanting to dress like a man. Is that true in our culture? No. Is there are universal truth? Yes. The universal truth is in verse 3, *The head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.* That last phrase is the key to the whole passage. *The head of Christ is God.* It describes relationships within the Godhead. God is one and God is three. There is one God and within the Godhead there are three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are complete equals and all three possess full deity with equality.

Yet *the head of Christ is God*, or to say it another way, the head of God the Son is God the Father who exercises leadership in the relationship. Within this relationship of equals there are different functions and roles. God the Father has a role that He delights in and so do the Son and the Spirit. The Son has a role that He delights in and so the do the Father and the Spirit. Creation was an explosion of joy in that relationship that overflowed to create the universe. Creation is God's self-portrait of His relational joy within the Godhead. In some ways it's like a couple in love. Their joy in the relationship compels them to put pictures of themselves in their car and on the fridge and on their Facebook page. Happy pictures. The Father and Son built happy pictures into creation; pictures of their delight in their relationship, their love, their equality, their unity, and their diversity. The supreme created picture of the relationships in the Godhead is human sexuality and gender.

God's First Self-Portrait

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God

created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. (Genesis 1:26-28)

God purpose is to create a unique representation of Himself, different from the dolphins or the lizards or anything else in all creation. These creatures would bear His image. They would reflect the nature of God in their personhood in an absolutely unique way.

How many of you have seen this?



This is Norman Rockwell's self-portrait. It is very clever. Most self-portraits are just the painter's perspective of himself, but Rockwell did a portrait of himself painting a portrait of himself and looking in the mirror to see himself. There really are three perspectives in this one painting. We see the painter from behind. We see the painter's face in the mirror and we see in the picture how the painter sees himself on the canvas. It may be the cleverest self-portrait ever. Well...except one; the one we are talking about today.

When God made His self-portrait, it required more than the one perspective. He could have created mankind all one gender because after all there is only one God. He could have done that. All men. Not only would the human race not last long, the earth would have smelled like a men's locker room. God is one but He is more than one. God is one but the core of His glory and beauty is His three-in-oneness. If He created mankind unisex, the portrait would be incomplete. What did God do? *God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)*

That last pronoun is the key. The human race is a "them;" not plurality of maleness, but plurality of gender. They are the same but different. Equal but different. Male and female, both individually bearing God's image and together representing what God is like; plurality in unity; two in one, male first than female. God the Father in headship, God the Son in an equal but different role.

Do you see the brilliance of this in its original form? Before the Fall and man's abuse of headship and women's resentment of it? Before the Fall distorted marriage and sin burdened it? Before all the brokenness and pain? When God made Adam and Eve, Adam's masculine expression and her feminine beauty perfectly complemented one another in a relationship of total equals, a relationship intended for honor and respect, a relationship that delighted in what they had in common and what made them so vastly different.

God loved it. He loved seeing Adam's tender servant leadership in the relationship. He loved to see Eve's playful companionship and creativity. Even their sexual expression was a delight to Him. He made them to fit together. As someone has said, God didn't cover His eyes as their sexuality became physical oneness. He watched and laughed with delight as that physical delight in one another rose to a level as close to the Father's delight in the Son as humans can get. This picture is restored, though imperfectly, in Christian marriage. Men and women were created so vastly different for a divine purpose. God made us a mirror of Himself. He's Norman Rockwell looking in it. Our gender distinctions are for His glory and for His delight.

The head of Christ is God (1 Corinthians 11:3). Everything flows from that. So as I said last week, I hope that you realize our maleness or femaleness is much more than body parts and plumbing. It is at the core of our personhood and God's divine purpose for how we express the glory of His person through our gender AND in our culture.

God's Portrait in Culture

That's the key to the puzzle of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. The cultural things are odd to us just like our cultural expressions would be odd to them. I saw a trailer recently of a movie that looks like it will be a pretty dumb and forgettable movie and not worth seeing. The movie is about a group of guys who go back in time all the way to 1986. This was interesting to me because 1986 is the year I graduated from high school. It is a little depressing. They are making movies about going ALL THE WAY back to my senior year in high school.

Anyway, the movie is about the culture shock these guys have seeing people living in 1986 culture. People listening to cassette tapes and girls wearing leg warmers. We're only talking 23 years ago. 1 Corinthians 11 is 2000 years ago. The culture was so different and the cultural expressions of gender in that culture were different as well. Here's Paul's point, because God delights in gender distinctions, *he wants masculinity and femininity expressed in culturally relevant ways*. So let's finish up this section and remember: there's an old culture here.

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. (1 Corinthians 11:11-12)

To get verse 11, we have to see that in verses 8-9 Paul is describing the relationship between men and women. Men were created first. Women second. Man was created directly by God. Woman was created from man and derives her nature from his. The summary in verse 9 says that woman was created for man. Genesis 2, God's own word says that she is a suitable helpmate for him. And we men would happily add, extremely hot ones at that.

Paul balances that statement in verse 11 by stating the obvious: men and women are in this together and we need each other. While man came first, man is not independent from woman as every man is born of a woman. Do you see the creative irony? Woman was made of man (Adam's rib) but every man comes from a woman (human birth). A woman's role in

a man's life as mother forever indebts men to women and who can deny the bond that a son feels toward his mother and a mom feels toward her son? So while there is a created structure between the genders of headship and submission, that is within an overall reality of mutual dependency on one another. And all this is from God. All this is God's design.

Several years ago I had the opportunity to work with an organization of professional athletes who after their career travel and speak to schools and camps. I kind of made a friendship with one of those guys and he came to Bethel and spoke to our kids and to a school up in Gary. I remember we were driving there and he told me of how he had recently gone to a boxing gym to speak. As he walked around the gym, these boxers were fighting and working out. He said, "The language I heard was so disturbing that when they got everybody together for me to talk to them, I said, 'I cannot believe the language around here (easy to say to boxers when you are an ex-NFL lineman).'" He said, "How many of you have a grandmother praying for you?" He continued, "I saw heads drop in shame and hands go up around the room." It doesn't matter how big and tough you are, everybody has a momma and that woman represents a relationship of dependency. Men to women. Women to men. Humanity to God.

Here is where Paul gets cultural AND where some peculiar interpretations lead to Amish and Mennonite dress for their women.

Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. (1 Corinthians 11:13-16)

In verses 4-10, Paul equates a woman wearing a shawl, with a woman who is properly expressing her womanhood according to cultural expectations. Similar to that, he says that a woman's hair is, like the shawl, a "covering" or a first century cultural expression of femaleness. For a woman to shave off her head would be a disgrace (Verse 6) because she would be looking like a man and not assuming her role in culture as a woman. Similarly, in that culture a man with long hair would be a man trying to look like a woman in that culture.

Remember: is this a cultural truth or a universal one? When Paul says in verse 14, *does not nature itself teach*, he is referring to the natural way things feel in their culture. In that culture, a man with long hair was a man trying to look like a woman. Is that universally true? No. And how long is long? There are places in the world where men wear their hair shaggy long and that is what men are expected to look like. There are other places where men where it short. And for many men here, God has decided you look better without any hair at all. What changes faster in our culture than hairstyles, even for men? Short. Long. Wavy. Messy. Buzz cut. Gelled. Moused. Flat top. Mullet. You name the style and at some point, that look was really cool.

The mistake to make here is to think God has a kind of hairstyle or hair length that he likes. God doesn't care about that. What God does care about is the expression of gender distinction in culture. He delights in the differences. There's nothing uglier than men trying to look like women and women trying look like men. Those that think God is mandating a hairstyle here force their wives to look like Crystal Gale and their daughters to look like Pilgrims. Hair is superficial. Gender distinction is divine, Triune, and transcultural.

So men, rather than obsessing over your hair, obsess over your manhood and the expressing of that in culturally relevant ways within the church and the home. Ladies, rather than going for the Crystal Gale look and shopping for hair buns, worry about the expressing of real feminine beauty which 1 Peter 3 defines: *Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, or the putting on of clothing—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.* (1 Peter 3:4)

This is not about the head and it’s not about the hair, it’s about God’s purpose and design for manhood and womanhood and our need to express that in cultural norms of our day. 2000 years ago in Corinth, women wore shawls and men didn’t. Men shaved their heads and women didn’t. Women wore long hair and men didn’t. Are there cultural norms for men and women today? Perhaps not as clear cut as back then and I’ll not sketch it for you lest it become a legalistic standard. I grew up in a Christianity that said, “This is what Christians look like” and I have no desire for that to be at play here at Bethel.

It’s not so much expectations on what *Christians* look like as what *men and women in our culture* look like, behave like, express sexuality like. God doesn’t want a society of sexual sameness. Unisex. Gender Neutral. Homogeneity. He wants gender differences celebrated and expressed in culturally relevant ways.

Final Thought on Gender in Culture

Jesus conformed to cultural norms of masculinity

If you remain unconvinced, I would point you to the most masculine man who has ever lived, Jesus Christ. It’s one thing to conform when you are a man or woman, but what responsibility do you have to conform to culture when you are God? None. Jesus could have done, looked like, dressed like, wore His hair like whatever He wanted to do. He felt no peer pressure. He didn’t look at magazines and wish He looked like the models. He was and is Almighty God. He could do whatever He wanted.

Yet, He was a man and His entire life epitomized masculinity in cultural expression (He dressed and looked like a man), in His relationships (men were drawn to Him and He had vital relationships with men and women), in His vocational choice as the son of a carpenter, and in His singleness - this is noteworthy as singles can sometimes wonder about how to express sexuality in culture as a single. Jesus was single yet fully masculine. Jesus looked like a man, sounded like a man, dressed like a man, related to men, related to women, related to children. If you are looking for what it means to be a man in culture, there is one particular aspect of masculinity that Jesus exemplifies. Before I tell you, it really brings up the question, what is masculinity? *At the heart of biblical masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for, and protect women in ways appropriate to a man’s differing relationship.* (John Piper)

To lead. To provide. To protect. That’s a man. You know where I am going. Jesus sets the bar for being a man in the love He demonstrated toward others when He gave His life for us on the cross. He leads in love. He leads in self-sacrificial provision. He leads in selfless protection of others.

Jesus is the most masculine man who has ever lived. Men, we take our cues from Him. Want to be a man? *Self-sacrificing servant leadership that willingly gives of himself for the good of others* - That’s a real man. That’s a hero. That’s a Savior. Jesus is too often portrayed in media and art as skinny, effeminate, and weak. Effeminate men don’t attract

the kind of men who left their careers to be with Him. Effeminate men don't draw crowds of thousands who hang on His every word. Effeminate men lack the courage and strength of character to face down the Pilates and the Herods and entire organizations like the Pharisees trying to kill you.

Womanly men aren't that way. But a masculine man is. God may not call you to give your life on a cross. He may call you to selflessness as it relates to your wife or your children, to sacrifice career advancement so you can love those God has called you to express manhood towards. He may not call you to be scourged but He may call you to servant leadership in the church and the time and effort that requires. He may not call you to many things, but if you are a male than He calls you to be a man and to be a Christian man is to follow the example of a masculine Savior.

Real men will step up and do so. I believe that when men are really men, the women around them get very feminine. Women don't want to be around spiritual wimps or bullies. (Phrasing from Pastor Joel Virgo) they want Christ-like men for whom their femininity naturally complements and elevates. As men are masculine and women are feminine, the happy picture, the glory God intended when He made us in His image, male and female, shines through to our joy and His glory.

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