

## Study 17. 1 Cor 11:2-16

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Big idea: like last week the theme is using our freedom for the good of others. While the gospel brings freedom and equality for women and men, this freedom should be used to build up not destroy.

### Introduction

This is one of the most difficult parts of 1 Corinthians to read, as we are listening in mid way through a conversation which assumes several cultural practices which are obscure to us. But despite its strangeness to us, and significant uncertainties over some parts of it, it nevertheless offers a beautiful and life giving message to us today. In their commentary, Rosner and Ciampa helpfully summarise some of the principles which are clear from this passage:

Despite its obscurities, Paul's teaching in this passage clearly affirms three things: a balance between (1) respect for a creation mandate to maintain and even celebrate the gender distinctions with which we have been created; (2) a respect for culturally specific approaches to guarding moral and sexual purity; and (3) a commitment to fully integrating women and their gifts into the experience of the worshipping community. (Ciampa and Rosner, *1 Corinthians*, 557)

### Observation and interpretation

Read Galatians 3:28

- How does the gospel affect how we see gender differences?

This passage continues the theme from last week of using freedom for building up rather than destroying others.

Our starting point here is important: men and women are both created equally in God's image (see also Gen 1:27), and in Christ they are equally inheritors of every spiritual blessing. Yet this massive statement of equality seems to have been taken by some of the people at Corinth as permission to throw out gender differences entirely. Newly converted women who embraced their Christian freedom too enthusiastically risked publicly shaming their husbands.

### Read 11:2-3

- What does “head” mean in this context? Why do you think Paul has chosen to use this word?
- Does the ordering of these relationships imply inferiority?
- Is this a statement about the relationship between men and women in general, or specifically about a husband and a wife?

Keep in mind here that “man” and “husband” (and “woman” and “wife”) are the same word in the original language (“aner” means man/husband, and “gyne” means woman/wife) so context has to be the guide.

### Read 11:4-6

- What involvement does Paul anticipate women will have in public Christian worship? (Maybe look at Joel 2:28)
- What does Paul fear will happen if either men or women throw off cultural gender markers while performing Christian ministry?

It is not quite certain what sort of “head covering” Paul is talking about here. It may be he is talking about having *long hair* versus having *short hair*, or it may be that he is talking about a type of hat which women were expected to wear in a public context.

We don’t have time to go into the details here, but depending on how we understand the social context, it could be that a woman not wearing her head covering would be seen as immodest (flaunting her sexual freedom). On the other hand, it is possible that a man wearing long hair was a sign that he was effeminate or homosexual.

### Read 11:7-16

- Why does Paul link his argument back to Adam and Eve?
- Given we are part of a new creation in Christ, why should we pay attention to our origins in Adam and Eve?

This passage is not about whether women are equal with men or share the image of God with them. Genesis 1:27 makes clear that both man and woman are made in his image, and Paul reinforces that later in 1 Cor 15:49.

Paul’s concern here seems to be more about women and men not distracting attention away from God’s glory by dressing in a way that was (in that culture) shocking or scandalous or seductive. As a reminder about how important our earthly gatherings are, Paul cites the angels – heavenly observers who will notice anything in our church services which takes away from God’s glory.

Rosner and Ciampa write this: “By wearing her veil during public worship the woman signals her own status as created by God even while covering up any trace of human glory in the presence of God and his angelic court. The woman’s head is not one over which others have authority. God has granted her authority to pray and prophesy. She exercises that authority in a dignified way by respecting both herself and the rest of the congregation through the avoidance of provocative attire or any dress or behavior which would bring shame on herself, others, or God, in a context where all eyes and every heart should be focused on God’s glory in the midst of his holy people.” (1 Corinthians, p 533)

## **Application / Implications**

Paul's concern seems to be about not bringing shame on others while performing Christian ministry. Can you think of examples in our culture where this principle might apply?

Are there things that we do in church worship which could possibly draw attention away from God's glory and on to ourselves? What can be done to minimise this risk?

How can we ensure that the community benefits from the spiritual gifts of both men and women?

## **Prayer ideas**

- Thanks God for the goodness of our gendered humanity, and the even greater promise of the new creation
- Pray for our gatherings that they would glorify God and not man
- Thank God for the spiritual gifts given to us through Godly women in our congregation, and pray that they will use them in a way that builds up the body of Christ and brings glory to God