

Dressing Distinctively—1st Corinthians 11:3-16—8/27/23
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Today I'm going to try to answer two final questions as I try to finish my summer series answering questions you sent me in the spring.

Head coverings came up in the question on women's roles that I addressed last week & so I need to discuss 1st Corinthians 11.

And since the main point of 1st Corinthians 11:3-16 is one we may hesitate to support from an OT chapter that also prohibits mixed fabrics, I'll address that objection also.

Last week we surveyed 1st Timothy 2:8-15 to explain how men & women have different roles in the church & men are to be the public teachers & leaders.

1st Timothy 2:11-14 says "*Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.*"

Women are to be discipled & serve in relationships, but their teaching ministries are specifically with women & children.

And that is not a cultural accommodation we can ignore because it is grounded in the creation of man first & woman as his helper.

The fall into sin happened when that got out of order & the woman being deceived was another reason for male leadership.

What God said through Paul is clear & how God supported it with His created order was foundational for all time.

Those are transcendent, timeless reasons that are not confined to 1 culture or historical context & are not hard to understand.

We'll see that same appeal to God's created order in 1st Corinthians 11 as we unpack the point that men & women should dress distinctively.

And we need not be afraid to reference that point from the Law of God through Moses to Israel in the OT as well.

Deuteronomy 22:5 says, "*A woman shall not wear man's clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.*"

As in any text, we ask why God had Moses write that law in Deuteronomy 22:5 & we don't have to look far for an answer.

The answer follows it & the explanation is clear—*for*, or because, *whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.*

That is from the God who created male & female as 2 distinct genders that are not to be confused or mixed or changed.

To transgress or mess it up by cross-dressing is abominable, meaning it's corrupted, polluted, perverse, & abhorrent.

That is not a reason that was specific to Israel being separate from the nations around them as some laws for Israel were.

Such reasons may confine a command to that historical context.

But we always must ask what the transcendent principle is.

Being separate from the unbelieving world is a transcendent principle that God teaches for His people throughout time in the OT & the NT.

Today we may wear mixed fabrics because the NT revealed God's plan to bring Jews & Gentiles together into the church.

And that meant the cultural distinctions for Israel in the law of Moses were for a different context & season in history in God's plans.

But the transcendent principle of being set apart from the unbelieving world still applies in different ways, as do principles for protecting life & property & marriage.

Murder & stealing & adultery are still wrong & those commandments are repeated in the NT as are other commands for our relationships.

The NT repeats God's transcendent design for men & women to have distinct roles among God's people & in the home.

1st Corinthians 11:3-16 is a passage about the distinctiveness in how men & women should even dress differently & not cross-dress.

With that background on how to rightly apply a related passage like Deuteronomy 22:5 & how to answer objections about its context, let's turn to 1st Corinthians 11.

I gave that background to answer how to respond to an objection that Christians pick & choose which standards to impose because we don't obey Israelite laws like not mixing fabrics or eating shellfish.

Having differences in application in various times & cultures does not negate foundational, transcendent, timeless principles.

And that's the reality we return to with discussion of head coverings as we now turn our attention to 1st Corinthians 11:3-16.

Open to 1st Corinthians 11:1-16 & let's read this text. [READ]

This passage teaches the distinctiveness of men dressing in ways that are clearly masculine & women dress as clearly feminine & roots those in God's created order.

Those are absolute & undeniable commitments I want you to take away from our overview of these verses today.

Various details of this passage may be difficult to grasp, but the main point is completely discernible & desperately needed today.

We need clarity against cross-dressing abominations such as perverted drag shows & clothes marketed as uniting genders.

And listen—for you ladies here who apply this distinctiveness with some type of physical covering on your head, I want to encourage you.

That is a fitting & reasonable application to make & I want to honor you & not offend your conscience at all.

And for you ladies who apply that distinctiveness by having longer hair or you men who apply that by having shorter hair, those are fitting & reasonable applications to make as well.

If you have other applications or are not certain what to do for your hair or clothes, I know we live in confusing times, but just know you must dress distinctively according to your gender.

That is the unmistakable imperative grounded in God's order.

Now that I've given you the bottom line, let's walk through the text to understand how God clearly communicated that.

I'll outline 6 points to see from the text to help us understand God's clear point with proper balance to help us consider applications.

Point #1 is to see the convictional principle.

Read 1st Corinthians 11:3 again for the convictional principle. [READ]

This is the convictional principle, the fundamental transcendent foundation upon which everything that follows is built.

Paul started with this as what to understand first & it's the reality that functional authority & submission are involved in every relationship.

God created man & woman as equal persons with different roles to show something of His own relationship with Himself.

Since God perfectly enjoys His relationships as Father, Son & Holy Spirit, the happiest earthly relationships will follow His pattern.

And God's pattern for relationships involves role distinctions among the Persons of the Trinity who are fully equal.

So the differences between the roles of men & women are not to be dreaded. but are to be studied & celebrated.

God shows diverse roles in relationship as equals as mentioned lastly in verse 3 between God the Father & God the Son.

God is not the source of Christ, as some try to force the definition of head to mean here to remove the sense of authority.

Jesus Christ was eternally God the Son & yet He submitted to God the Father as His head to come to earth as a man.

In an analogous way, man is spoken of as the head of woman.

So male-female roles are rooted in the very nature of our Triune God, not in some ancient sinister bias.

God planned equal genders with different roles to reflect something about Himself & to bless us with relationships like His.

This is God's design from the beginning that is restored when we come to Christ as our head as verse 3 opens with.

So from verse 3, we see & learn from what we note 1st as the convictional principle that is timeless & unchanging.

Then verses 4-6 describe some customs in the culture of Corinth that are probably distinct from other times & places.

Paul referenced those customs that they would've understood even though we may not understand everything about them.

For example, in that culture only a prostitute or feminist would've shaved her head & that would've been a disgrace.

In Roman societies like Corinth, women often wore a head-covering as way to honor her husband & show she was not available to others, possibly like a wedding band might symbolize today.

So as we move on, let's learn from the contextual application that we find in verses 4-6 as we read verses 4-6 again. [READ]

Verse 3 states point #1, the convictional principle, & then verses 4-6 describe point #2, the contextual application.

Verse 4 gives the male application in that context that a man with something literally "*down from head*" disgraces his head.

The literal translation "*down from head*" is sometimes thought to refer to longer hair when it's linked with verse 14.

But the appeal to nature in verses 14-15 about hair length is in addition to head coverings & so those are likely separate.

The language is also not clear if this was referring to a veil over the face or a shawl or robe or something draped over the head.

The same could be said for what's noted in verse 5 for women.

It is possible that the head covering could be her long hair or it could also refer to long hair being rolled up in a bun & concealed because a woman's hair is her glory as verse 15 says.

Some commentators reference ancient writings about women's hair as part of sexual appeal that was to be covered.

Others assume the covering is a facial veil & still others describe the covering as part of the robe that is pulled up over the head at times.

What was obvious was that having her head shaved or hair cut off was disgraceful & multiple historical & OT references support that reality that Paul alluded to in verse 6.

That explanation in the second part of verse 6 supports the shocking statement in the first part of verse 6 to emphasize that this was serious.

For a woman to rebel against submission to her husband & potentially flaunt her freedom in a way that was immodest was just as bad as shaving her head.

It was as bad as branding herself as a prostitute or adulterer.

That hyperbolic analogy highlighted the contextual application for a Christian woman in Corinth was to cover her head.

Whether that meant a veil over her face or a shawl over her head or a robe over her hair or her hair up or down, it was not optional.

Whatever the head covering was, it was expected for a woman & not acceptable for a man in that context.

And the undeniable, timeless point for today is that a man's head should look different from a woman's head in how it's adorned.

Verses 7-10 make a connection to creation to show this more.

We've seen the convictional principle & the contextual application—now 3rdly note the creation connection in verses 7-10.

Read verses 7-10 to see #3 the creation connection. [READ]

Verse 7 begins with the word 'for' because it's further explaining this gender distinctiveness in appearance.

As the image & glory of God, man should not cover his head & yet the woman is the glory of man & she should cover her head

Of course, Genesis 1:26-27 says God made man in His image as male & female & so both male & female are made in the image of God.

They are equal in God's image, but God made them differently, making man to rule & then showing his need for a helper.

So God made woman for the man as his helper & He did so in the special way of making woman from the man.

God created woman both FROM the man & FOR the man.

Man was made to lead & woman was his helper as his equal partner.

Those historical realities are what verses 8-9 reference to explain the distinctive differences in how the heads of men & women are to be adorned.

Verse 7 describes woman as the glory of man because she completed the man, she supplied what was not good in God's sinless creation.

That is God's order & it's not to be cancelled or kept quiet.

As verse 7 linked this to men, so verse 10 links it to women.

Verse 7 opened with the explanatory 'for' & verse 10 continues with the explanatory 'therefore' or 'for this reason'.

Just as the man ought not in verse 7, so the woman ought.

That's how we know this is not her exercising her own authority, but her submitting to God's authority for her.

That's why translators add 'a symbol' or 'sign of' to clarify that the authority on her head is referring to the head covering.

And verse 10 adds this is because of the angels, which you know, right?—or probably not & you are not alone.

This likely means that angels value proper submission because they rightly submitted to God as opposed to demons that did not.

And particularly here that is important for women in their adornment to be modest & distinct in recognition of their role.

The angels are part of this connection to creation in verses 7-10.

This overall creation connection is timeless & transcendent, not cultural, no matter what the specifics of the context were.

And this reference to creation is like what we saw in 1st Timothy 2 last week that is helpful to interpret the praying & prophesying here.

Praying & prophesying by all men & women here cannot be functions of public teaching or exercising authority over men.

That was not allowed according to 1st Timothy 2 & God's Word does not contradict itself even if 1st Timothy was written 10 years later.

If those things were out of order in Corinth as so much else was, Paul corrected it in 1st Corinthians 14.

In the context of prophecies, 1st Corinthians 14:34-35 gave clear guidelines for women like those in 1st Timothy 2.

1st Corinthians 14:34-35 says, *“The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.”*

The clarity of that leads me to believe that the praying & prophesying in chapter 11 referred to relational ministry in the church.

As the church gathered in homes & ministered elsewhere to the lost, the relational interaction & outreach would've provided opportunities for prayer & sharing truth.

Prophesying could have included speaking truth that had already been revealed like we do today in counseling or evangelizing.

It could also have included receiving new revelation as the NT was not yet written & this letter was early in that process.

But either way, the praying & prophesying done here by both men & women were not public preaching & teaching or exercising authority.

There's no reason to try to use 1st Corinthians 11 to overthrow or contradict the clarity of 1st Timothy 2 & 1st Corinthians 14.

Yet 1st Corinthians 11 does have a clarification that is important.

Verses 11-12 give the complementary clarification as point #4.

Read verses 11-12 again to see that. [READ]

This starts with *however* to clarify the complementary importance & interdependence of men & women.

The affirmation & enjoyment of God's goodness in this design only comes in the Lord, as the verse begins.

But in the Lord, we appreciate the mutual dependence & partnership of men & women.

So verses 11-12 give us a 4th point today, to see & learn from the complementary clarification.

Verse 11 states in reciprocal ways that neither is independent.

And verse 12 explains the creation of woman coming from the man & the birth of man coming through the woman.

God designed it that way so that men & women would need each other & would appreciate their differences.

Men & women are complementary, meaning they complete one another, they round out & fulfill & perfectly partner with each other.

Verses 11-12 clarify that so that women are not thought of as less important or less valuable or less than equal.

But grasping complementary differences does not mean external appearances do not matter because verses 13-15 come back to those.

In case you thought the contextual application could be left & not applied to your appearance today, it comes up again.

Please understand that what you look like is not something that only legalistic or Pharisaical or self-absorbed or worldly people care about.

Dressing distinctively as a male or female does matter.

Read verses 13-15 where it comes up again. [READ]

We'll call point #5 the correlation with nature.

Verse 3 gave the convictional principle & verses 4-6 the contextual application & verses 7-10 the creation connection & verses 11-12 the complementary clarification.

Now verses 13-15 give point #5, the correlation with nature.

Paul urges readers each to think & discern personally if it is suitable & fitting for a woman to pray to God with no covering.

Of course, we should clarify that women are welcomed to approach God in prayer through Christ & don't need to stay in the court of the women like Jewish women did in Israel.

Women are brought near to God by the blood of Christ to approach God's throne of grace boldly just as men in Christ are.

But even nature gives women hair as a glorious covering that shows her head is to be covered as distinct from men.

And nature also teaches that long hair is a dishonor to men.

That's not my opinion—it's what these verses say as this correlation from nature.

Some see this distinction of hair length as the natural attractiveness of feminine hairstyles that should be a dishonor for a man to have.

Just as Romans 1:26-27 says homosexuality is unnatural, so it is natural for women to have long hair & men shorter hair.

You can research the hormone estrogen's effect on hair growth & testosterone's effect on hair loss if you want to research that further.

But without that, you can notice that men are far more likely to go bald & also far more likely to have facial hair, right?

You don't find many women who are bald or who have beards, right?

But we can look for the shine on men's heads around this room & find a number of men who are at least mostly bald, can't we?

That difference between men's & women's hair is at least part of what verse 14 is highlighting.

Women generally have longer hair in most cultures because men tend to lose their hair more quickly & more often.

We can find exceptions, but Paul was citing a general trend in nature.

And that connects back to his comments about hair length and head coverings as somehow rooted in creation.

God clearly designed differences in appearance for males & females.

The culture in Corinth added head coverings to the differences.

The point is that there was a difference between dressing like a man and dressing like a woman, from the hair & head on down the body.

And honoring that difference showed humility under God & honor for male leadership.

So God planned appearance & clothing to reflect gender differences.

I'm not clear precisely what the details of that should be.

But let's be honest with the text of God's Word and check our wardrobes for masculinity & femininity.

Scripture does teach that how we look & what we wear matter.

The point is for humble hearts to honor God's design & choose to display appropriate male-female distinctions in hair & clothing.

Will you try to apply this tough text or try to ignore it?

Are you more worried about looking weird in our image-obsessed world than you are about honoring God & His Word?

Do you live for the glory of God or the approval of people?

Of course, the answer is not to start measuring hair length & inventing extrabiblical rules by which to judge everyone else.

The goal is to start with the inside & get the heart to embrace God's design in a way that flows outward.

And the tough thing about this passage that may also a sign of God's wisdom is that it did not come with pictures.

Just as Psalms have no musical notes & freewill offerings have no percentages, so these verses have no illustrations.

Maybe that's because we might become contentious about it & that leads to our last point today that we read now from verse 16. [READ]

Paul & other churches had no other practice to display gender-distinctiveness, but he warned not to be contentious about it.

A bad human tendency is to want a rule that's easy to measure, easy to check off a list so we feel justified & righteous.

Then the temptation is to assume we've fulfilled the command on the outside while we totally miss the emphasis on the inside.

And what also can be missing is trust in God's design & faith in His grace to help us in our minds & mouths, not merely in our clothes.

Beware of danger that comes in 2 ways—rebellion or legalism.

Danger can come in a rebellious rejection of any standard including the internal goal OR danger can come in the exaltation of an external human standard that replaces the internal goal.

In other words, the danger can look like the mocker OR the Pharisee, but both are self-trusting & self-justifying.

They both focus more on how others are wrong & how I am right & I am justified in judging others & excusing myself.

So let's admit that temptation & note 6thly the call for peace.

Verse 16 gives us the 6th & final point—the call for peace.

We have no pictures of what this looks like & so that leaves us Christian freedom in how to apply the externals of this today.

Baseball caps or similar hats were not worn in ancient Roman or Greek cultures & so there's not an exact match for men to remove those in prayer, but this passage may help you appreciate that tradition.

I'm not saying this mandates that tradition just as I'm not saying this passage mandates women wearing or not wearing a veil or a bandana or shawl or robe or dress or other covering.

But verse 16 definitely mandates being peaceful & not contentious about however each of us chooses to apply this.

I don't mandate a literal holy kiss in greeting with each of you, but I do think Scripture mandates holy affection of some kind appropriate between brothers & sisters in the family of God.

Similarly, I'll leave you the freedom to apply what we've seen in this passage, but I remind you that applying it is not an option.

So think about it—when someone sees you, is there anything to make them question whether you are male or female?

Guys—is any of your style or clothing or appearance effeminate?

Ladies—is there anything masculine in how you look?

I realize that those are subjective questions that may depend on who's evaluating, but why leave anything in question?

We live in a culture completely confused about gender that desperately needs Christians to faithfully display & clearly celebrate manhood & womanhood.

As Paul wrote in 1st Corinthians 10:23 just before this, "*All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify.*"

In a society constantly assaulting the distinctive value of men & women, let your standard be what's profitable & builds up.

Don't live by what you can get away with as lawful when you & others watching you need to distinctive masculinity & femininity.

And parents, don't view this as a battle not worth fighting.

The world is fighting to blur all distinctions between maleness & femaleness & to neuter your child into despair & destruction.

Please take this seriously for yourself & generations to come.

And above all, let this passage remind you how desperate our hearts are as we know what reactions rise inside us & all the ways we fail to reach God's standards inside & out.

God meant it to be that way so we would always feel our need for Jesus as our righteousness & never trust ourselves.

And God meant it to be that way so we would always be thankful for Jesus dying to pay for all our sins.

And God meant it to be that way so we would always trust the Spirit's resurrection power to walk in these ways.

Then Jesus Christ will always be our focus & our hope.

And as our hearts respond to Him & trust His wisdom, we will want to be masculine men & feminine women for HIS glory.

Then what we wear or look like will be about HIM, not about the culture or what's cool or in or popular.

1st Corinthians 11:2-16 is about whether you are embracing or rejecting your manhood or womanhood & how you show that.

In a culture like Corinth or like ours today, we need to point out that God intended men & women to look different.

And we need to display that is because it honors His Word.

Pray with me for us to respond rightly to what we've heard.