

“Gender as Calling”



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“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” 1 Cor. 11:3

Recently, I have been preaching through 1 Corinthians. It is a remarkably modern letter. In it, the Apostle Paul addresses pride, divisions, lawsuits, sexuality, marriage and divorce, and how to handle disputable matters. Challenging issues, all. In addressing these matters, he continually returns to Christ crucified. (1 Cor. 2:2) The cross is God’s wisdom and power. The cross is the answer for how live at peace with one another, to remain pure in an impure world, and to endure in love with those around you.

But in 1 Corinthians 11, another issue is introduced. It involves the disruption of their worship services by some who were defying social customs regarding men and women. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is an obscure passage but the gist of it is that in first century Roman culture, it was normal for married women to cover their heads in public. Some of the wives in Corinth, however, were leaving their heads uncovered to flaunt their freedom in Christ. Perhaps mistaking or twisting Paul’s teaching in Galatians 3:28 that there is neither, “male or female,” in Christ, they professed that they were now free from any restraints regarding their gender. The behavior of these women was causing disruption to the worship services, and confusion in their community. Did following Jesus free them from their respective roles as men and women?

It is an important issue for us today. There is presently widespread confusion about gender. Powerful cultural forces insist that while sex has to do with a person's anatomy, gender has to do with their psychology. Therefore, one can have a "gender identity" that's different than one's biological sex. This way of thinking is not only prevalent in culture, but has infiltrated many places in the church as well.

How should a follower of Jesus think about these things?

1 Corinthians 11 gives us some guidance. When the Apostle Paul addresses the situation in Corinth, it is important to note how he approaches the matter: He goes back to creation. In 1 Corinthians 11:8-10 he says, "For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man." To address this complicated cultural matter, the Apostle Paul goes back to creation. He draws on the fact that, from the beginning, God created humanity, male and female, after his own image. (Gen. 1:28) For Paul, this also entails a created order where men exercise servant leadership (headship), and women willing submission for the glory of God. (Gen. 2:20) 1 Corinthians 11 emphasizes that salvation in Christ doesn't negate God's creative intent in the area of gender, but rather affirms and further establishes it. The message is clear: don't ignore the order and distinctions that God has woven into the very fabric of his creation. In Christ, male and female are equal, yet distinct. God has assigned different roles to each. These roles should be accepted as part of one's calling in Christ, and fulfilled for the glory of God and the good of the whole community.

As the Church faces pressure to conform to the culture's understanding of gender, we must take the same approach. We must learn from Paul. We must appeal to the creation. God is the Creator. He created and ordered his world as he saw fit. He has made each of us in his image, and has hardwired us to be male or female. He has given us engendered roles, not to oppress us, but rather to bless us. Salvation in Christ doesn't negate this reality, but affirms it. As Christians, we are called to live as Christian men, and Christian women, freely acknowledging the created distinctions between us. Indeed, we embrace our gender as part of our calling and thereby seek to honor Christ in all things.

The world will continue to reject and ridicule this view. But it gives us an opportunity to the witness to the truth of creation, and the blessing of salvation, and to more than just our neighbors.

In 1 Corinthians 11:10, Paul writes, "That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, *because of the angels.*" Wait, what? Paul seems to be referencing that the angels are regular observers of the church on earth. They are spiritual spectators to our worship and service to God, and that includes how we fulfill even these most basic of callings.

So, let us seek what makes for peace and the building up of the body. Let's not ignore or oppose our engendered callings. They are there because God put them there, and they are good because God is good.

After all, the angels are watching.