

Biblical Marriage Communicates Christ in a Pagan Culture

Another Look at Head-covering in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Preface

At the University of California at San Diego I reached the lecture hall door the same time as a young coed. As I gallantly opened it and waited for her to enter, she looked me straight in the eye and said, “Male chauvinist pig!” I laughed it off, thinking uncomplimentary thoughts of her less than luminous appearance and went to class. That was 1969. What I find fascinating is the enormous changes I have seen in my own thinking since that event of some 42 years ago. Though, at that time I was just learning to follow Christ, I somehow felt very secure in my “good, balanced appreciation” of women. She was just troubled, I thought. In retrospect, yes, she certainly was troubled, but I have to admit, in some ways she was right. I don’t really know what a chauvinist pig is, but if it was code for male arrogance -- ouch; it was true. Now, I still open doors, but with a different appreciation of God’s most complex of all creatures.

I realize now that my traditional understanding of men and women was, well, just that – traditional. I thought it was Biblical, but I was wrong. It would take decades of pondering the mysteries of the Bible to slowly change my fundamental understanding of gender and marriage, but change it has. That change has become for me the greatest evidence of the inspiration of the Bible. And the richness it has brought to my marriage and to our ministry is amazing. Now I realize how beautifully a biblical understanding of gender and marriage can communicate Jesus Christ and His transforming power, especially to people confused and disillusioned in a pagan world.

Introduction

Among the major milestones along my transformation journey was the stunning realization that God’s foundational principle for marriage in Genesis 2:24¹ about a man leaving parents to be “one flesh” with a woman was really about Christ and the church. Paul made this clear in his letter to the Ephesians (5:31). This says marriage communicates by analogy the relationships

¹ “A man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife and they shall be one flesh.”

between Christ and the church. It raises the stakes for hearing God's intent for marriage, and with that, gender.

But how can we hear the message? It seems so hidden. I was a serious student of the Bible, reading it daily in the original languages and yet I didn't begin to see what was beneath the surface for years. And on the surface too many passages of Scripture seem to provide proof texts for making women feel inferior.² What should we do with these passages? Should we ignore them, relegating them to the dusty shelves of cultural irrelevance? Or should we reinterpret them with obscure meanings of words so they'll sound more palatable to our 21st century perspective? No. But, the gender controversies of the last 50 years have provided motivation for many of us to look at these passages with fresh eyes. I now believe that each of the difficult passages on gender has a powerful and glorious contribution to the overall message of God's beautiful intent for the redemption of mankind.

This paper will examine one of these passages – 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. In it, Paul seems to talk about head-coverings, but I am suggesting that is just on the surface. It is merely a vehicle to illustrate foundational principles of marriage and gender for a people who were confused deeply by their pagan culture. I hope to show in this paper that God has a profound message in these foundational principles for us today, for we too can be deeply confused by our own culture. Marriage has been losing its luster and promise in the eyes of many, maybe most, of our young. But Biblical marriage can proclaim the glory and hope of the enduring love and power of Jesus Christ. This passage helps to show us how.

What I am presenting here is a theory. I do so with the hope that it might inspire others to test it out and perhaps develop it more thoroughly.

Structure of this paper.

I will discuss briefly cultural background issues and the question of relevance to American culture today. I will then discuss two central foundational principles of 1 Corinthians that are essential to understanding the head-covering passage. Then I'll discuss the passage itself followed by suggested applications for today's church.

² For example, Gen. 3, 1 Cor. 11:2-16, 1 Cor. 14:34-35, Eph. 5:22-24, 1 Tim. 2:9-15, Titus 2:3-5, 1 Peter 3:1-6.

Backgrounds of Corinth

There have been some very helpful works³ published in recent years giving insight into Corinthian life during the time of Paul. We will not review them here except to say they reinforce that the best background information about Corinth remains this letter itself. In it Paul responds to detailed questions and concerns and so gives us insight into their struggles. They resonate with those of us regularly involved in church life today. Some might argue that the Corinthians were confronted with more overt idolatry than we are. Our media saturation might argue otherwise. The Christians in Corinth were reminded constantly of idolatry's allure and offensiveness.⁴ Some of it is likely to have involved perverse sexual practices that clearly would undermine an understanding of marriage. Perhaps it's not so different after all.

There was likely at least some influence on sexual morality by the believing Jews within the local body. Their influence overall was significant enough for Paul to quote repeatedly from the Law⁵, Writings⁶ and Prophets⁷ and to appeal directly to the law at least 5 times.⁸ Hubbard suggests a broad spectrum of degrees of assimilation of the Jews into the pagan culture, but he also reports good evidence for a Jewish community around the synagogue including some proselytes.⁹ Whatever their contribution, much was lacking. Paul's teaching in chapters 6 and 7 lays out great basic principles, clearly to correct flawed attitudes about marriage and sexuality. And they are great foundational principles for today's culture, too.

One more point of interest. Women apparently had more rights and voice than we might otherwise imagine. This is clear from Paul's symmetric language in chapter 7.¹⁰ He speaks as if men and women had similar choices available to them in the matters of sexuality and separation or divorce.

³ E.g. Ferguson, Everett, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. 3d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Gill, David W.J., "1 Corinthians". *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*. Edited by Clinton E. Arnold. (Grand Rapids, MI, 2002); Hubbard, Moyer V., *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World*. (Peabody, MA: Henrickson Publishers, 2010).

⁴ 1 Cor. 8 and 10.

⁵ 1 Cor. 5:13, 6:16, 9:9, 10:7, 15:45.

⁶ 1 Cor. 3:19, 3:20, 10:26, 15:27.

⁷ 1 Cor. 1:19, 1:31, 2:9, 2:16, 14:21, 15:32, 15:54, 15:55.

⁸ 1 Cor. 9:8-9, 20; 14:21, 34; 15:56.

⁹ Hubbard, *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World*. Pp 22-24.

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 7:1-16.

Pagan with Judeo(/Christian) Influence

Given that the cultural starting point of the new believers in Corinth was a mixture of a pagan and a Judaic mindset, it seems increasingly similar to the culture of the new Christian in America today. We have the vestiges of a Judeo-Christian values system, but it too is mixed with a decidedly pagan mindset.¹¹ This shows up in the church as alarming numbers of failed marriages, unmarried cohabitation, widespread extramarital sexuality even among young teens, homosexual marriage, and on and on. The statistics are widely reported and won't be defended here. Sadly, it is common knowledge to those of us who work with youth and young adults.

1 Corinthians 11

Now let's move into 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. To understand this passage, we need to understand two underlying principles that surround it in context. We'll refer to them as "edificationism" and deference. They are the keys to seeing the message below the surface. Once we've discussed these principles, we'll move to Paul's thematic statement (verse 3) for the passage. Then we'll discuss head-covering as a practical illustration of Paul's theme. We then move to questions about specific enigmas in the verses that follow.

Edificationism

From the beginning of the letter Paul has dealt with numerous issues that had come to his attention -- some as questions, others as disturbing reports. Early on, as in most of his letters, he reminds the readers of the essentials of their common bond: "Jesus Christ and this One crucified"¹² and the work of the Holy Spirit within them.¹³ Paul deals with the implications of

¹¹ Why do I say, a decidedly pagan mindset? The debates about marriage and gender over the last 50 years are being held in the public forum with the Bible officially excluded from the table. The emerging definitions are based on history, sociology, freedom and fairness. As these take priority over the wisdom of God, they become the latest oracles, the latest gods to upstage the God of the Bible. By this definition, American culture is increasingly becoming pagan. There is good news, however. Since the letters of Paul are mostly written to believers dealing with their alluring, pagan cultures, God has left us with ample help in the midst of our own.

¹² 1 Cor. 2:2.

these essentials while dealing with their issues one by one. In chapter 6 he comes to the issues of sexuality, marriage, divorce/separation, and singleness.¹⁴ At this point in the letter a common principle emerges. That principle is reinforced persistently through chapter 14. As mentioned, we'll call it "edificationism." Paul wants them to be so personally stabilized by the love of Christ that, instead of seeking their own rights, they seek how to build up each other – how to edify each other. For example, in chapter 7 he says a husband or a wife should each see his or her body as belonging to the other, not to his or her self.¹⁵ In chapter 8, the one who understands that idols are nothing should be sensitive to the one not yet that free.¹⁶ In chapter 9, Paul gives his own example of putting their needs ahead of his individual rights. In chapter 10, he says it outright, "All things are lawful but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful but not all things edify. Let no one be seeking that which is for himself, but that which is for the other."¹⁷ We then come to the head-covering passage in the beginning of chapter 11.

After the head-covering passage (11:2-16), edificationism is central as Paul corrects their attitudes about the Lord's supper.¹⁸ In chapter 12, he says their diverse spiritual gifts are for the edification of one another in the body of believers.¹⁹ Edificationism reaches its most eloquent expression in chapter 13 where it is vibrantly and poetically described as love. Finally, in chapter 14, Paul applies it to their gatherings. It needs to be the motivating attitude for anyone speaking in a gathering of the body.²⁰

I am suggesting that the head-covering passage, 11:2-16, is another example within a broad ranging set of examples of how to edify each other in the body of believers. That strongly influences how we interpret it.

Deference

The second principle surrounding the head-covering passage is deference. Deference is related to edification. I am defining it as an active choice to put one's rights or desires second in

¹³ 1 Cor. 2:6-16.

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 6:12-7:40.

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 7:1-6.

¹⁶ 1 Cor. 8.

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 10:23-24.

¹⁸ 1 Cor. 11:17-34.

¹⁹ 1 Cor. 12.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 14:1-5, 12, 24-26.

favor of another's. Edificationism seeks to build someone up. Deference is a means to do it. Paul illustrates this especially well in 1 Cor. 14:26-35. In order to keep their gatherings orderly, Paul advises them to defer to one another. If someone is speaking and someone else has a word to say, the first is to give way (become quiet²¹) in deference to the second. Notice the person is to do this voluntarily. Sure, there might be a nudge or a nod from a leader or friend, and maybe a private word for repeat offenders, but it's best if those attending the meeting bring with them an attitude of deference, in addition to his or her desire to edify.

Without the combination of deference and edificationism, the head-covering text seems oppressive and dark. But with these principles in mind, the beauty of God's design emerges from the page. Armed with these two principles let's examine 1 Cor. 11:2-16.

Head-covering – 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 [author's translation]

(2) I am impressed with [praising] you that you have remembered everything from me; and as I have passed it on to you, you are holding fast to *my* teaching [tradition, lit. that which was passed on]. (3) And *now* I want you to know this: of every man, the head is Christ; and *the* head of woman is the man; and *the* head of Christ is God.

(4) Every man praying or prophesying with head covered puts to shame his Head. (5) And every woman praying or prophesying with head uncovered puts to shame her head. For she is one and the same as one with a shaved head. (6) For if a woman is not covered, let her have hair cut short; And if it is a shame to a woman to be shaved or cut short, let her remain covered. (7) For a man ought not to cover his head, being *the* image and glory of God. And the woman is *the* glory of a man. (8) For man is not from woman but woman from man; (9) And man was not created for the woman but woman for the man. (10) For this reason a woman ought to have control over her head, on account of the angels. (11) Except neither is woman apart from man or man apart from woman in the Lord. (12) For just as the woman is from the man so the man is through the woman. And all things are from God!

(13) Consider this yourselves, is it fitting for a woman to be praying to God uncovered? (14) Doesn't nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair it is dishonorable to him? (15) But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; because long hair is given to her as a covering.

(16) And if anyone seems to be contentious about this, we ourselves have not such a practice nor do the churches of God.

²¹ The Greek word used here, *σιγάω*, is often used in the New Testament to describe a person or group becoming silent when they were previously speaking. For example, it is used in Luke 18:39 when the people wanted to silence the beggar who was crying out, "Jesus, have mercy on me." In Luke 20:26 it is used to describe the silencing of the disingenuous questioners. In Acts 15:12, "the assembly fell silent". In Acts 15:13, Paul and Barnabas "finished speaking."

Theme: Headship and Submission – Verses 2-3

Paul uses thematic statements for most of his subsections in 1 Corinthians. The premise of this paper, “Biblical Marriage Communicates Christ,” is communicated most directly in the thematic statement for this section. It is found in verse 3:

(3) And *now* I want you to know this: of every man, the head is Christ; and *the* head of woman is the man; and *the* head of Christ is God.

Is Paul talking about men and women in general or husbands and wives? The translators are divided. The words for man and husband are the same in the original text, likewise the words for woman and wife. Context must be used to decide. Since the example Paul gives is clearly about husbands and wives, and Paul’s closest parallel statement in Ephesians 5:23 is commonly taken as referring to husband and wife, we’ll assume that here as well. Can we learn some principles to help us in other male-female relationships? Yes, but that isn’t Paul’s main point.

Paul’s main point is that there are similarities between three marvelous and mysterious relationships. These similarities can help us learn about all three. Two of the relationships are eternal. One is temporal.

The two eternal relationships include Christ Himself – His relationship with people and His relationship with God. He came to earth so humanity might know about these, and become an integral part. Christ’s eternal relationships, both with the Father and with people, also serve as guides for the temporal – especially the relationship between husband and wife.

Paul follows his thematic statement by giving the Corinthians an instructive example of how that temporal marriage relationship can reflect the eternal relationships. In so doing marriage becomes a powerful tool to teach ourselves and others about the two eternal relationships. In other words, marriage has the power to communicate Christ.

What are the essentials Paul wants them to see? In all three relationships, Paul calls attention to the clearly ordained head. Christ is the head of man. A husband is the head of his wife. God is the head of Christ.

How does a head act? Jesus taught it continuously in word and actions. “Whoever would be great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever would be first among you, let him be

your slave.”²² His kenosis²³ and cross²⁴ are the ultimate examples of how a head acts on behalf of those he serves – the ultimate examples of seeking to edify those who follow him.

How is the woman supposed to respond to a head? Jesus demonstrated that too, by his selfless, even shameless, submission to God.²⁵ Consider for example John 5:19, “Listen carefully to what I’m saying to you. The Son is not able to do anything from Himself, but only what He sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, these things the Son does likewise.” This helps us deal with Paul’s use of the word “submission” in various places whether it be men and women submitting to one another²⁶ or slaves to their masters,²⁷ or a woman deferring to her husband²⁸ as in this passage.

In any case, submission is most powerful when it is a gift given in deference to another. It emerges from within the heart of one person as a means of edifying another person. That makes it a beautiful expression of a security that comes from faith. When it is compelled by someone else, its essence is lost. When it is voluntary it is consistent with God’s overarching objective of His law “written on the heart.”²⁹ And it is Christ-like.

So in Paul’s context Christ becomes the example to husband and wife. He wants to show the power of marriage to reflect Christ’s eternal relationships with God and with people. The husband must seek to bring glory to Christ by deference to Him and by following His example of headship, by sacrificially building up His wife. The wife is to seek to bring glory to her husband in deference to him. The husband’s headship communicates that of Christ over the church and God over Christ. Her submission communicates that of Christ to God and the church to Christ. Who are they communicating to? Both to their own souls and to those around them – their children, their fellow believers, and even the pagan culture.

²² Matt. 20:26-27. See also Matt. 23:11-12, Mark 9:35, Luke 9:48, etc.

²³ Php. 2:5-8.

²⁴ Luke 9:23-25, 1 Peter 2:21-23.

²⁵ John 4:34, 5:30, 6:38, 8:28; Matt. 26:39; Php. 2:6-8; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; etc.

²⁶ Eph. 5:21.

²⁷ Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22; 1 Tim. 6:1, Tit. 2:9.

²⁸ 1 Cor. 14:32,34; Eph. 5:22, 24; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim. 2:11, Tit. 2:5.

²⁹ Deu. 6:5-6, 10:16, 30:6,10; Jos. 22:5, Ez. 11:19-20, 36:26-27.

Case Study – verses 4-16

To illustrate his point, Paul uses an example the people of Corinth were faced with each time they gathered. Apparently some wives were participating in prayer and prophecy without their heads covered. Paul goes to surprising lengths to explain why that isn't consistent with the headship model of Christ. But why does he care? On the surface it seems trivial, but Paul sees it undermining the very order that God designed in order to help communicate the most important truths the church needs to be communicating – the headship of Christ over the church, and the submission of Christ to God. Gatherings of believers for worship needed to proclaim that in every possible way.

To our 21st century American minds, a head-covering or lack thereof may seem insignificant. But the symbolic impact was clearly powerful then and remains so in many cultures today. The increasing visibility today of the middle-eastern cultures which place a high value on head-covering gives us perhaps a better insight into some of these mysteries of the first century. We will now look in more detail at Paul's head-covering case study to see how it illustrates the principles of headship, edificationism and deference to help the Corinthians in their first century culture. We will then consider how it can apply to our Christian culture today.

The first century Corinthian church.

Women apparently kept themselves covered in public places. This was likely for their own protection from unwanted advances, or perhaps it related to their status – rich or poor, married or unmarried, slave or free. In the meetings among believers, some women were feeling free to remove the restrictive head-coverings when speaking aloud.³⁰ Paul explains to them how this practice compromises a God-designed sacredness of the marital relationship and so compromises the principles of headship God uses marriage to communicate. How?

A woman's hair was considered part of her beauty, her pride, her allure. Hence, verse 15: "if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her." But a married woman's allure should be for her husband. She is his "glory" (verse 7). Common to all cultures is a woman's immense power to

³⁰ The acknowledgment of women praying or prophesying in the gatherings sheds light on 1 Cor. 14:34-35. If we recognize *σιγάω* there as "become silent" (per footnote 21) and *λαλεῖν* as "to keep speaking," as in continuing action, the apparent contradiction with chapter 11 can be resolved. If we include the principles of edification and deference that passage can be a beautiful guide for how women can defer to the men and thus help empower them to learn to lead.

turn a man's head. Even Job speaks of his contract with his eyes.³¹ Nothing has changed on that front. The fact that she is speaking in the gathering already calls attention to her, but showing off her beauty with hair uncovered sets her up to be a distraction -- obviously inappropriate, especially in a worship gathering.

At the same time, it reflects badly on her husband. How? If he's unaware, it's an indictment on his headship. If he is aware but either disengaged or disempowered, it's an indictment on his headship. In any case, it's also an indictment on her for lack of sensitivity to or respect for her husband. What should they do?

Paul gives a simple, but strongly-worded solution and uses it as an important teaching tool. If a woman, particularly a married woman, is going to pray or prophesy, let her either cover her head, or come with hair cut short.³² This would show she is sensitive to not being a distraction to the men in general, but more importantly he wants her to show special deference to her husband. She would be saying to him and everyone else, "My beauty and my loyalty belong to my husband." If she comes to the meeting with a desire to edify her husband and show deference to him, her behavior will reflect that too. And their marriage becomes a tool to communicate the headship and submission of Christ.

The man's uncovered head.

How does a man's uncovered head fit into the argument? Paul says it is a shame for a man to have his head covered while praying or prophesying. There may have been some sort of specific cultural significance to men's head-coverings that we don't understand today. In absence of more data, it was at least symbolic of the order Paul wants married couples to communicate. The husband's head is Christ. His glory is to be fully presented, unveiled, to Christ. While the wife's uncovered hair was for her husband, the husband's is for Christ. But, doesn't she belong to Christ too? Yes, but Christ wants their marriage to show the symbolism of headship and submission. Their attire and conduct in their worship services needed to reflect that.

Creation order.

In verses 8-9, Paul goes into the order of creation from Genesis 2. Why? Paul is reinforcing the principles of headship from verse 3. He's making it clear that the order of creation

³¹ Job 31:1.

³² It's possible Paul is being a bit sarcastic here. If so, it would show how important it was to get them to listen.

continued to give very important insights into God's intent for marriage. Men and women are in a partnership. Both are created in the image of God, but neither male nor female was adequate to reflect what God wanted to communicate of His image. It would take both of them and their marriage to communicate the eternal truths God wanted to communicate. Man was to take responsibility for implementing God's plan. Woman was to be his helper. Since "helper" is used at times for God,³³ it was not to be a second class role, but a suitable partner, perhaps a chief advisor or an advocate. Woman would be empowered by God to help build men. Men would be empowered by God to help create environments in which women and children could flourish safely.

Mutuality.

Isn't mutuality important? Yes. In spite of the differences of God's design of men and women, Paul emphasizes in verses 11-12 the mutual dependencies they were designed with, "For just as the woman is from the man, so the man is through the woman. And all things are from God!" (Verse 12).

On account of the angels.

Why does Paul say in verse 10, "For this reason a woman ought to have control over her head, on account of the angels"? Ephesians 3:10 comes to mind, "... so that through the church, it might be made known now to the rulers and authorities in the supra-heavens the multifaceted wisdom of God." Amazingly God uses the church to communicate His plans to beings far beyond the earth. The woman who chooses to put edification and deference ahead of her own rights is proclaiming the freedom from self that she was granted by Christ. And when she chooses to use her deference to her husband to help communicate Christ in her marriage, she would be sending a powerful message even to all the heavenly hosts.

What about the 21st Century?

Clearly this passage is not just about head-covering. It's about letting marriage communicate what God designed it to communicate – wordless images of headship and submission – to proclaim Christ to a desperate world. Paul showed how something as simple as attire can reflect

³³ E.g. Gen. 33:29, Ps. 10:14, Ps. 118:7, etc.

attitudes of the heart towards one another and towards Christ. It can communicate attitudes of edificationism and deference. As God brings stability to the heart, a person is liberated from self-seeking to seeking to edify others, and so to be willing to defer to them. How does this work today? I'll suggest some applications.

1. *It's more than just us.* One message from this passage is that our marriages impact the world far more than we realize. They communicate to our children and to their children. They communicate to our churches and to our communities. If we're correct about the tie to Ephesians 3:10, their impact is even beyond this world. If God designed marriage to communicate Christ's relationship with the Father and with the church, then we need to learn about marriage from Him. The Bible provides our primary opportunity. As our culture becomes increasingly pagan, the message of Christ must be communicated by every means He has made available to us.
2. *Learning a healthy marriage.* As marriage becomes increasingly corrupted by pagan influences, the institution itself seems to lose its value. God's design for healthy marriage is preserved in the example of Christ's relationship with the church and with God. As we learn from Him, our marriages will become more healthy. As they become more healthy, they will proclaim Him even more loudly. Everyone wins.
3. *Freed to edify and defer.* If we men and women can find our individual wholeness and security in the love of Jesus Christ, we can be liberated to put the needs of others ahead of our own. How does a man put a woman's needs ahead of his own? How does a woman put a man's needs ahead of her own? Passages like this one reveal some of the secrets. Men's and women's needs differ, sometimes rather subtly. Instead of using the Bible to legislate church life and behavior, we should use it to gain insight into how to meet each other's needs. It gives men insight into how to help women, and it gives women insight into how to help men. That's edificationism. If we can approach our marriages and our church gatherings asking how we can edify each other, deference would become the gift we'd give out of love, rather than out of a legalistic obligation.
4. *Women have unique power in the body of believers.* Since Christ does not force himself on human beings, Christ-like headship does not force its will either. Men can only serve as heads if women choose by their own free will to defer to them. This leaves women with the power. They can help build men as heads or ignore them. At the same time,

women naturally have an enormous impact on boys as mothers, grandmothers, teachers and sisters. Add to that the distracting beauty women possess and it's clear that in the church women have most of the natural power. When the Bible repeatedly speaks to women about deferring to men, it is not disparaging; it's an acknowledgment of their unique power. They are asked by God to use that power to help build men and therefore to impact the culture of the church.

5. *A woman's alluring beauty is for her husband* (or perhaps future husband). One of the great, seldom-spoken problems of gatherings of men and women is that power of a woman's beauty. It takes special sensitivity and wisdom on her part for it not to be a distraction in the gatherings of believers. When a woman speaks in a gathering of men and women, her attire and the way she carries herself communicate well beyond her words. In America and most of the west, head-covering is not an issue, but adequate-covering is. Tight clothing, short skirts, fashions designed to highlight every feminine distinctive are terribly distracting to men. Add to that provocative tattoos or excessive piercings and men can find it hard to focus on worship. If the woman is speaking, her message is often lost. If she is married, she sends a message by her clothing and demeanor that reflects on her relationship with her husband. Modesty shows respect and deference to him, while immodesty shows instability, pride or a lack of understanding -- any of which robs her of credibility and reflects poorly on her husband. Different cultures may show this in different ways, but the important issue is attitude. If a woman seeks to edify the men and women around her and bring honor to her husband, she will ask the right questions ahead of time and adapt accordingly. Men need to protect the dignity of women by guarding their own eyes, hearts, and minds. But they also need to help inform and encourage their wives, daughters and sisters to help them know what is appropriate apparel and behavior in public gatherings.

This is a large issue in American culture today and difficult to address without becoming legalistic. Apparently it was a large issue in Corinth, too. Rules and dress codes become oppressive, but a healthy attitude can be an excellent guide in the variety of cultures we often participate in. Edificationism and deference are powerful attitudes that Paul was seeking to inspire in the men and women of Corinth. The Holy Spirit can use these ideas to inspire the same attitudes in us.

Conclusion

On May 9, 2010, our congregation began a journey through 1 Corinthians. On December 5 we came to chapter 11, verses 2-16. Though we couldn't explore quite the detail that we have in this paper, I was amazed by the response. From teens to octogenarians, they were like thirsty desert wanderers finding a cool spring of water. I believe there was a hunger for some encouraging news about gender. I'm now convinced these passages, like the rest of God's Word, speak glorious liberating truth, not dark repressive rules. Is the message easy to see? No. Is it worth the effort? Absolutely!

For years our debates in evangelicalism have been between egalitarian and complementarian positions. It was a needed debate. The egalitarians seemed to be saying, "We don't know what these offending passages mean, but they can't mean what the historical church has said." Many of them dismissed the passages as relevant only to some narrow historic significance, or sought to redefine words like "head" or "submission." I appreciate their efforts in the search for truth. We complementarians have sometimes been defensive, sincerely wanting to guard the integrity of the word of God. Too often the debate has focused on what men and women have the right to do in marriage and in the church. Perhaps it's time to move to different questions. How can men and women edify each other in the church? How can men learn from the Bible how to use their unique gifts to create safe environments in which women can flourish? How can women use their unique gifts to help build up men of God?

These "ism" words are awkward, but perhaps it's time for us to move beyond our discussion of egalitarianism versus complementarianism, and move to simply edificationism – discussing how the Bible equips us to edify one another.