

“How to Read the Bible For All It’s Worth: Epistles in Context”

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Sermon:

**Introduction...**

[pic] I have here a little book entitled *The Revived Puritan: The Spirituality of George Whitefield* edited by Michael Haykin, a church history professor who lives in Dundas. The book is a collection of letters written in the 1700’s by George Whitefield, the famous preacher and evangelist of the Great Awakening, a friend and classmate of both John and Charles Wesley, as well as an acquaintance of Jonathan Edwards. The letters have been selected to highlight the spiritual piety or devotion of George Whitefield and they are filled with his humility and love for God.

[Read letter 5, p. 91]

The letters are truly beautiful and humbling. Here is this great, famous preacher, known across the Atlantic whose ministry and preaching were at the heart of a tremendous revival, yet he is so aware of his own sinfulness, so concerned that he not grow conceited or puffed up. They’re wonderful letters to read.

But as you read them, a number of things become clear. First, we don’t know who he was writing to all the time. Historians can probably figure out most of the people, and I suspect in the large collections of Whitefield’s works it may explain who the people are, but it’s not clear from the letters themselves who Whitefield is writing to. Furthermore, we don’t know the nature of his relationship with these people. Are they fans? Are they close friends? Supporters, perhaps? People Whitefield led to the Lord? We don’t know. Have they been in touch with him somehow? If so, what did they say to Whitefield? Is he responding to their questions or comments?

Furthermore, as one reads these letters, it also becomes clear that while they give us a beautiful glimpse into part of Whitefield’s spiritual devotion, they are in no way a comprehensive collection of what Whitefield believed. They are not a theological treatise. They are not even a collection of sermons. While we may be able to deduce a number of things Whitefield believed, a number of theological truths he held, we would not be able to answer a lot of questions about Whitefield’s theology from these letters. Why? Because that is not why he wrote them. He didn’t write these letters to be pamphlets of theology. He wrote them to real people, many of whom he knew, with specific purposes in mind at that moment. So although they are spiritually rich letters, they are not theologically complete. They were never intended to be!

[pic] In the same way, we have a collection of letters in the NT, called “epistles,” which are full of rich theology and wonderful spirituality. But we don’t always know to whom they were written. Even if we know the recipients of these letters, that doesn’t always give us all we would like to know about the situations they were in. Sometimes it is clear that the recipients have asked questions previously and in the NT letters are answers, but we don’t always know the question they asked! We just have the answer and are trying to piece together what they must have asked, what they were struggling with or wondering about. [Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 60]

Furthermore, the NT letters are not systematic or complete works of theology by their authors. We may be able to piece together some aspects of Paul’s theology, or Peter’s or John’s from their letters, what we have is in no way a complete record of their theological beliefs or practices. What we have is applied theology. That is, we have theology applied to specific circumstances, questions or problems that their letters were written to address. [Fee and Stuart, p. 59]

Because we are only hearing half a conversation, we need to do some investigative work if we are to truly understand the epistles. The word epistle, by the way, is just a fancy form of letter. There are certain styles and elements that go into an epistle that are beyond our scope this morning, but just keep in mind that an epistle is a letter meant to be read by a group of people.

But, as I was saying, we need to do some puzzling out, some investigation if we are to make sense of what the epistles mean. Much of this work will feel familiar to the other topics we’ve covered because the tools for good exegesis work everywhere. With the epistles, we must do our best to answer the questions, “**Who, what,**

**when, where, why and how?”** For the epistles, we want to know who wrote it? To whom was it written? Where were the recipients? When was this written? How or what techniques did the author use in writing this letter? And, most importantly for the epistles, why did the author write to them? Identifying why the epistle was written in the big picture will shed light on the meaning of section in the smaller picture. **The overall purpose of the epistle shapes our understanding of individual passages.**

This means that if we are going to understand an individual passage or verse in an epistles, we need to take the time to read the entire epistle first! This is best done out loud, too, because the epistles were intended to be read out loud to the recipients. If you can, read it through twice before going to the particular passage in question. Reading the entire epistle will give you a sense of the overarching purpose, themes and tone of the letter. You will start to pick up on repeated ideas, words or images in the letter. This will give clues to the purpose of the letter. Along the way, some of the basic questions of who, where and why may even be stated explicitly in the text itself.

### ***Text***

We don't have time to read an entire epistle together this morning, at least not 1 Corinthians, from which we are taking our case study. But if this passage interests you, I do encourage you to read through the entire letter in one sitting later today. You may find it insightful!

Let's turn now the passage we are going to use as our case study. Please turn with me to 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

We will read it through, then I will give us some principles for applying the epistles today before we dive into the passage.

### ***Principles for Epistles***

As I mentioned before, the epistles were not written to be universal tracts of theology. They were written to specific individuals or groups with a specific goal in mind. They are very much occasional documents, by which I mean written for a particular occasion! They are used to apply theology to particular problems or situations.

This makes it difficult, sometimes, for us to apply them well today. Certain things, like “walk by the Spirit” are applicable all the time. But what about things like “Greet one another with a holy kiss”? Is it ok to make a cultural shift to a handshake? Or what about Paul's request to Timothy, in 2 Timothy, to bring his cloak from Troas? Does that have application today? Do we believe that we must all wear cloaks because not only did Paul wear one, but the Holy Spirit inspired him to include his request for his cloak in a letter that was later made part of the NT?

As we are reading the epistles, we must keep in mind **“What was the main point or points of this letter?”** Because the main point of the letter will put boundaries on what any individual passage can mean. Good exegesis, that is, good work pulling out the meaning of the text, will always keep in mind the author's original meaning or point of a particular passage. Good exegesis will also help us understand the particular circumstances the author was addressing. When we zero in on specific verses, or even a couple verses, we easily miss the overarching situation the author had in mind when he wrote the letter.

**When our particular circumstances match the original recipients' circumstances, then we know the application today is the same as back then.** That said, if our circumstances are different, we need to do some translation of the application to make it apply today. This is where getting at the author's original point is so important! The holy kiss to the warm handshake is a good example of this. Kissing is still a way people greet one another in some cultures, but in our culture it would make people feel uncomfortable. So we apply the principle of greeting one another warmly and sincerely to our culture. The form of the application is different but the principle is the same.

But what principles are enduring? What principles are beyond cultural and apply to all Christians for all time? This is the ultimate question we need to ask of any particular passage. The answer will sometimes be easy, like holy kissing or bearing one another's burdens or do everything without grumbling or complaint. Holy kissing is culture specific. Bearing one another's burdens is eternal. Doing everything without grumbling or complaining is also universal.

Other passages, like the one we are looking at today, are not as easy to classify. Some general guidelines,

however, do exist. Questions of morality are never culture specific. The lists of sins in the epistles (things we morally shouldn't do) are non-negotiable, as are the lists of imperatives (the things we should do).

Sometimes the author himself says that something is not universal, that it's a matter of choice, like eating meat sacrificed to idols or observing holidays. These, then, are not binding on all Christians for all time. They are not universal. Other times, the authors are being counter-cultural. **When the author is being counter-cultural it is likely this is binding for us.** They are intentionally instructing Christians in their day to do something abnormal for their cultural context. These are times when they are more likely to be binding on Christians for all time. By contrast, the authors are sometimes making concessions to contemporary culture for the sake of sharing the gospel. These cultural concessions are not binding for all time, even though the principle of observing cultural norms for the sake of the gospel is a good principle we can still apply. The cultural norms we face today are different, though, so the shape of these cultural concessions will be different than in the Bible.

### **Case Study**

Let's try to do an example of this kind of work. Let's consider again 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. This is a very difficult passage that has produced a lot of different results in different denominations. That is why I chose it today, because it is one that would be difficult for people to do on their own. But most of the time we are able to do a lot of good exegetical work without the help of experts just by reading carefully and thoughtfully.

When one reads all of 1 Corinthians, some important aspects come out. First, the Corinthians were very interested in what made one "spiritual." In fact, they thought they were more spiritual than Paul! There was also a lot of conflict in Corinth as well as between them and Paul. It seems that they believed that since becoming Christians things of this world no longer mattered. So some were using their freedom in Christ to indulge in sexual pleasures because they thought the body no longer mattered. Others, using the same reasoning, were choosing to live a life of celibacy, even though they were married. Others were so caught up in being wise and spiritual that they were neglecting the needs of the poor. Still others were becoming conceited because they had certain spiritual gifts.

Now let's consider our particular passage. This is a particularly difficult passage to understand fully. But even as we struggle to fathom what Paul's point may be, we need to remember that it was clear to Paul and it was clear to the Corinthians! [Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *1 Corinthians*, p. 503] It seems that Paul is responding to a question or a report from Corinth in their letter to him and this passage is a response to that question. We don't know the logic to the passage as a whole or even the precise meaning of some important terms. [Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, p. 492]

First, Paul uses the word "head" both metaphorically and literally. The topic he is discussing is literal coverings for one's head. He opens the discussion, however, speaking of heads metaphorically. We don't know what Paul means by his metaphorical use of the word head. Head, in Greek, is different than in English. We automatically think of the "head of a company" or "the head of the household." We think of someone being of chief importance. In Greek, however, that use is rare. More common would be a use to mean source, like we say the head of a river and mean the source of the river. **In terms of people, head in Greek means the source of life!** In speaking of the man being the head of the woman, Paul says nothing of man's authority. Rather, he speaks of woman being man's glory! [Fee, p. 502-503]

One thing that is clear is that women were both praying and prophesying in public worship services. Paul doesn't condemn this practice whatsoever. Rather, his concern seems to be that as women pray and prophesy in church that they do it dressed in an appropriate way. Proper attire is Paul's point, not the relationship between men and women. Paul does not follow up his image of the creation order with a command for the women to submit or be subordinate. Rather, he follows up his creation order imagery with a command to dress appropriately! [Ciampa and Rosner, p. 510]

That issue in Corinth seems to be that when the women prayed and prophesied in public worship, some had given up wearing the loose scarf or shawl that would cover their heads. **The radical thing in Christianity is that women were actually worshipping alongside men!** This didn't happen in Judaism or Roman culture. [Ciampa and Rosner, p. 519] Even if women were allowed in the congregation, never would they lead worship alongside the men! Reading between the lines throughout 1 Corinthians, it seems that these women, excited to be worshipping alongside the men, were disregarding gender distinctions between men and women and this was

the problem. [Ciampa and Rosner, p. 513] Why the head covering was the particular expression of the problem is not clear to us today, but it would have been clear to the Corinthians and to Paul.

Paul associates not using their head covering, their shawl, with having their hair cut off or cut short. Potentially this would make them look “mannish” and is possibly linked with lesbianism. Similarly, Paul speaks of it as dishonourable for a man to have long hair, which in that culture would often be an indication of homosexuality. In both cases, men with long hair and women with short, was blurring the distinction between male and female. Paul makes an argument by analogy that **women not using their head covering was a similar blurring of gender lines.** [Fee, p. 511]

Another reason for the head covering being an issue has to do with cultural ideas of sexuality. In many cultures, including Roman culture in Paul’s day, a woman’s sexual prowess was thought to reside in her hair. [Ciampa and Rosner, p. 516 n. 44] Covering her hair was a sign of moral or sexual modesty. Leaving her hair uncovered would be a sign of moral or sexual promiscuity. We have discovered an ancient Greek letter in which a man speaks of going out in public to gaze upon women’s uncovered braids and then later recalling those braids at home to fantasize about! [Ciampa and Rosner, p. 532]

While this may seem far-fetched to us, “It’s just hair,” a parallel example of cultural differences with regard to sexuality can be seen in how we think of a woman’s breasts. [pic] We cover breasts in our society because we equate them with sexuality. But think about primitive tribes around the world in which women do not cover their breasts! In the late 1800’s National Geographic made the decision to publish pictures of native peoples just as they are, including women bearing their breasts as part of everyday life. We find it scandalous! They wonder what the big deal is.

In Corinth, the inappropriate attire of some of the women leading worship was a distraction from the glory of God. It meant some were not hearing the words prayed or prophesied, they were too absorbed by the inappropriately dressed woman in front of them. Paul’s statement to the women inappropriately dressed is basically, “If you don’t like the head scarf, you can always cut your hair off completely! Otherwise, cover up please.” [Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 306]

**Verses 7** goes on to speak of man being God’s glory and woman being man’s glory. This is another part of Paul’s argument that is confusing to us, but would have been clear to the Corinthians. Here’s the best explanation I found in a couple of commentaries. Glory in this context is a reflection of the nature or quality of another. Thus, man is the glory of God means that man reflects God’s nature. Woman is the glory of man means she reflects man’s nature (the good parts at least). [Ciampa and Rosner, p. 527] In the creation account in Genesis 2, when Adam (literally man in Hebrew) sees Eve, he “glories” in her because she “completes” him. Remember, Adam was deficient without Eve. He, being alone, was the first thing in creation that was not good. Eve is Adam’s “helper” but not in a servant kind of way. She is not subordinate to Adam, but rather she completes Adam. [Fee, p. 517] Thus woman is man’s glory.

What does this have to do with worship, though? It actually ties in to Paul’s obscure comment about “the angels.” Angels, in Jewish belief, were zealous defenders of God’s glory. They would literally slay anyone who attempted to steal or detract from God’s glory! So, when the people gather to worship God, man should leave his head uncovered because he is God’s glory. Being visible adds to God’s glory. Women, however, are man’s glory, not God’s glory. Thus, when in the presence of God, women should veil their heads so as to veil man’s glory and not detract from God’s glory!

**“Paul’s ultimate point seems to be that nothing should happen in worship that would detract from God’s glory, including behaviour that would draw attention to the glory of man.”** [Ciampa and Rosner, p. 526-527] The women are to cover their heads, not because they are in the presence of men, but because they are in the presence of God and his angels. In their presence, not man’s, they must hide the glory of man as a sign of worship to God and recognition of his glory!

Things brings us to the “sign of authority” on the woman’s head. Sadly, this has been interpreted by many people to mean that women must wear a sign that they are under the authority of men. Let me correct that right here and let me do so with a picture. [pic] Who is this? [Queen Elizabeth] What is on her head? [a crown] What does the crown symbolize? [authority] So, looking at our passage, what does the queen have on her head? [a sign of authority]

There are many statues and images of Roman men and women who had “authority on their heads” meaning crowns or laurels, etc. [Ciampa and Rosner, p. 532] Psalm 8 speaks of both men and women being created just below the angels and being crowned with honour and glory. Paul intended for the congregation “to see the head covering as a visible symbol of their authority to proclaim a prophetic word to the congregation.” [Bailey, p. 311] Wearing a veil or head scarf during public worship, women would be displaying their status as created by God even while covering up any trace of human glory in the presence of God and his angels.

Paul has thus made a strong argument from creation that women should wear the head covering while they pray of prophesy. It is an obscure argument to us, but it would not have been so difficult for the Corinthians to understand.

In verse 12, having made his argument from Adam and Eve, Paul moves to temper how far his readers take that argument. “However, in the Lord, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman...” He goes on to talk about how although Eve came from Adam, all men now come from women (their mothers!). Men and women are interdependent and come from God. This is Paul’s attempt to caution us not to take the Adam and Eve relationship too far. Sadly, many people over the centuries have done just that! They have argued that this passage calls for the subordination of women to men. But that’s exactly what Paul is trying to avoid! **Nowhere in the text does Paul talk about submitting or subordination. He talks about clothing and gender differences.**

Although the passage talks about “headship” it does not talk about different roles for men and women in church, even leading worship. The distinctions between men and women are about how they dress, not their roles in the church. In fact, Paul clearly affirms women leading in worship in the same tasks that men perform!

People, though, have taken headship and the fact that women was created for man to mean that women are subject to men, or subordinate to men by their very nature. They miss that when God says to Eve that man will rule over her it is part of the curse of sin, not part of the original created order!

What people tend to miss is the nature of Eve’s role with respect to Adam prior to the fall. Eve was created because Adam was deficient and incomplete. The Hebrew word for “helper” is “ezer” which is a term elsewhere used for God’s relationship to Israel. God is Israel’s helper, Israel’s saviour! [Bailey, p. 310] (Think of the hymn which calls God our “Ebenezer.”) Eve’s creation rectifies Adam’s deficiencies. [Ciampa and Rosner, p. 528]

Thus, moving forward to Corinth, women don’t need to try to be “manly” when leading worship, they shouldn’t try to hide their femininity, but rather should embrace their feminine side by wearing the head covering appropriate in their culture. “Ideally, Christian women were worshipping side-by-side with the men of the community, even praying and prophesying along with the men, but in a way that did not bring shame or disgrace on those men or anyone else.” [Ciampa and Rosner, p. 531]

### ***Application***

So what are we to do with this today? How do we apply this to our culture? First, I want us all to see the importance of doing good exegesis! **We must be careful not to read into a text what we think it already says!**

As we do good exegesis, the meaning of the text will become clear. Sometimes we need some outside help to do that if the passage is particularly difficult, but honestly most passages are able to be studied well just with careful reading of the entire text. Our case study today was specifically chosen because it is an exception to that rule and needs some extra resources.

One of the reasons our text is so difficult is because of the cultural references and assumptions Paul makes in his arguments. We are no longer part of their culture, so we don’t immediately see how his argument works. We read into his words meanings from our culture, like “head” meaning “boss” or “most important person” rather than source. We don’t speak of something being another’s glory. We don’t wear head coverings. Women’s fashion is such that short hair is not a disgrace. So much of Paul’s argument, many of his appeals don’t work on us.

**This demonstrates for us the importance of context for the epistles.** We must do our best to understand the historical context in which the letters were written and the cultural context into which the author was speaking. Remember the example from National Geographic. If a Christian woman from one of those tribes because a

missionary to Canada, we would expect her to cover her breasts in our culture! Especially if she came to church and wanted to speak! But that's a culturally relative practice similar to covering a woman's head in Paul's day.

If that's something Paul says that is shaped by his culture, what is something he says that is counter-cultural? **He clearly affirms women praying and prophesying in church!** That is, counter-culturally, Paul affirms women in leading the congregation in the same roles as men lead. That was incredibly counter-cultural back then! In some churches it is counter-cultural still today. And remember, the counter-cultural instructions are more likely to be principles that are binding for all Christians throughout history.

One of Paul's main purposes in 1 Corinthians was to correct a false belief that in the Kingdom of God there was no distinction between men and women in any way. While it is true that when it comes to justification there is no male or female, that doesn't mean gender disappears. In the same way, racial differences are not erased in the body of Christ either! Jamaicans are still Jamaicans, Brazilians are still Brazilians, and Filipinos are still Filipinos. We are all Christian first, but we don't try to change the beautiful variety and diversity God has created. Similarly, we should not try to make the women look like men when they lead worship, nor the men to look like women. We can celebrate the diversity God has created while still be united in the salvation Christ Jesus brings.