

“Stop ‘Heading’ in the Wrong Direction”

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Most people are familiar with the Declaration of Independence signed by the American Colonies on July 4, 1776, a document that inspired many other similar decisions and documents by other countries in the years that followed. But in more recent times a spirit of personal independence, an excessive and self-centred individualism has also taken root—a kind of “I’ll do what I want and I don’t care what you think” attitude. As one writer put it, “Dying to self is basically un-American.”

We also get a sense in reading Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that some of them were thinking and acting in excessively independent ways. But followers of Jesus are neither independent nor dependent but interdependent as we discover in today’s passage.

Opening Question(s) – Choose one.

- When you enter a worship service, do you tend to think mainly of your personal relationship to God or your relationship with your fellow worshippers? Explain.
- What statements do you think people make by their appearance/attire?

Study Questions

- 1) **Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.** What are your first impressions of this passage? What visible problem(s) is Paul addressing?
- 2) In this passage, what limits does Paul put on the women? On the men? On the church? How was what the women, and church, was doing a declaration of independence?
- 3) The word “head” (*kephale*) is used in various ways in this passage. In verse 3 “head” could mean one of three widely recognized uses: “source” (head of a river), “foremost” (head of the class), or “topmost” (head of state). Which metaphorical meaning of “head” best fits in verse 3? Explain.
- 4) In the culture of Corinth, respectable married women covered their hair in public (or possible = wore it up rather than letting it fall loose). What reasons does Paul give for continuing this practice (vv.4-10, 13-16)?¹
- 5) Head coverings and hair (length, style, visibility) also marked differences between men & women. According to Paul, what differences between men and women have been built into creation by God himself (vv.7-10), and why is it important not to ignore or blur the boundaries between the sexes?
- 6) Paul balances or clarifies his previous statements by saying that “in the Lord” man is not independent of woman (vv.11-12). Why is this balance/clarification necessary?
- 7) In verse 16 Paul appeals to common practices of the wider church. Discuss examples of legitimate innovations (for a local context) and illegitimate deviations you’ve seen or experienced.

See next page for additional discussion options...

¹ “The covering or uncovering of the head is not merely a sign of individual freedom...it signifies either respect or disrespect for one’s superior in the hierarchy...If this seems odd to modern readers, we might well remember that analogous customs persist in our social world. For a man to show up at a formal dinner—or in church—wearing a baseball cap would be widely perceived as rude and irreverent. In ancient Mediterranean culture such a breach of etiquette would bring disgrace not only on the perpetrator of the act but also on the ‘head’ to whom that person was responsible.” Richard Hays, 1 Corinthians, 184.

Additional Discussion Option

Many things in our worship gatherings reflect the culture we live in (type of music, style of dress, etc.). What may be shocking in one culture (e.g. a woman praying in public with her head uncovered, dancing in worship, etc.) is totally normal and appropriate in another. Have someone in your group read out loud the following story from missionary Vincent Donovan about celebrating the Eucharist/Communion among a newly converted Masai tribe in Africa.

“Masai men had never eaten in the presence of Masai women. In their minds, the status and condition of women were such that the very presence of women at the time of eating was enough to pollute any food that was present. Hence, men could never eat with women. How then was Eucharist possible? In their minds it was not. If ever there was a need for Eucharist as a salvific sign of unity, it was here. I reminded them that beside the law of love which I had preached to them and they had accepted, I had never tried to interpret for them how they must work out this law in their homes and in their lives, and in their treatment of their daughters and wives and female neighbors (as sorely tempted as I had been to do just that). But here, in the Eucharist, we were at the heart of the unchanging gospel that I was passing on to them. They were free to accept that gospel or reject it, but if they accepted it, they were accepting the truth that [is] in the Eucharist, which is to say ‘in Christ, there is neither slave nor free, neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female.’ They did accept it, but it was surely a traumatic moment for them, as individuals and as a people, that first time when I blessed the cup, or gourd in this case, and passed it on to the woman sitting closest to me, told her to drink from it, and then pass it on to the man sitting next to me. I don’t remember any other pastoral experience in which the ‘sign of unity’ was so real for me. And I was not surprised some time later when a group of teenage girls told me privately that the ‘ilomon sidai’ (good news), that I talked about so constantly, was really good news for them.”

How can we discern when a cultural practice is okay and when it is a hindrance to worship and/or a hindrance in our witness to others?²

What practices in your own cultural heritage have you embraced or rejected as a Christian? Why?

² In his book, Christianity Rediscovered, missionary Vincent Donovan tells stories of his work among the various tribes in Africa and how culturally appropriate worship practices were discerned among the various newly converted groups. One community was the first to enshrine Christian thoughts in their Masai music. Another tribe that was evangelized shortly after the Masai, the Sonjo tribe, were very expert dancers. They did a very interesting thing during the Eucharist (i.e. the Lord’s Supper). The time of the Eucharist was seen by the elders in that community as the time of discernment and judgement. There were some of their cultural dances that they were ashamed to bring into the Eucharistic celebration and others that they were not ashamed of, that were part of their lives and which they wanted to offer in worship. Donovan concludes, “By that very fact, a judgment had been made on them” of which dances should and which dances should no longer be part of their lives at all.