

Challenges Christians Face

Head Coverings

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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Head Coverings

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of proper Christian worship. Let's learn about that in a message I am calling, "Head Coverings."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16:

²Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. ³But 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. ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. ⁷For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; ¹²for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. ¹³Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. (1 Corinthians 11:2-16)

Introduction

New Testament scholar C.F.D. Moule wrote that the difficulties found in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 “still await a really convincing explanation.”¹ Another scholar, George B. Caird, added, “It can hardly be said that the passage has yet surrendered its secret.”² A third scholar, Wayne A. Meeks, regarded it as “one of the most obscure passages in the Pauline letters.”³ And commentator Gordon D. Fee says that “this passage is full of notorious exegetical difficulties.”⁴

These exegetical difficulties include our understanding the meaning of some absolutely crucial terms (such as “head” [vv. 3-5]; “covered” [v. 4]; “uncovered” [vv. 5, 13]; “glory” [vv. 7, 15]; “a symbol of authority on her head” [v. 10]; “because of the angels” [v. 10]; and “no such practice” [v. 16]), and our uncertainty about prevailing customs in the Corinthian society and church.⁵

Because of these difficulties I will not have time to examine each term. I will simply present a broad overview of this section of Paul’s letter.

Commentator Richard Pratt, whose commentary I am following closely for this message,⁶ tells the following story:

I stood there behind the pulpit in a small town in Tasmania, Australia. It was the middle of July, but it was their winter—a very cold winter. As I stood there shivering in the pulpit, I could not believe what happened. It was just an innocent comment, a general application of the Bible. I think I simply said, “We should all be careful to be patient with one another.”

But suddenly a woman in the congregation jumped up and

¹ C. F. D. Moule, *Worship in the New Testament* (London: Lutterworth, 1961), 65.

² George B. Caird, “Paul and Women’s Liberty, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 54 (1972): 278.

³ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Writings of St. Paul* (New York, NY: Norton/Scribners, 1972), 38.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 492.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 492.

⁶ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 177-192.

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shouted. “Don’t tell me that until you have told my husband to get a job!”

She sat down as quickly as she stood up, but I remember everyone in the church turning around to look at her husband. His face turned bright red, and he hid his face in his hands. He did not look up again for the entire worship service.

I was only a guest, so I do not know what family dynamics were displayed at that moment. But one thing was sure. The woman did not feel the least obligation to honor her husband during their public worship.⁷

The church at Corinth faced all kinds of challenges. One of the challenges facing the Corinthian church was proper Christian worship. They were engaged in worship practices that dishonored one another, and that in turn dishonored Christ. One area in which they were dishonoring one another was with regard to head coverings. The improper use of head coverings corrupted their church’s worship service and damaged their church’s witness to the world.

Our church today exists in a different cultural context than the Corinthian church. Nevertheless, the same principles apply to us. We must honor God and one another in our worship service. If we do not, then we too will corrupt our worship service and damage our witness to the world.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today, we learn that proper Christian worship calls us to honor Christ and one another in worship. Let’s learn about this as follows:

1. Words of Praise (11:2)
2. The Divine Order (11:3)
3. Responsibilities to Heads (11:4-12)
4. Cultural Considerations (11:13-16)

⁷ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 179.

I. Words of Praise (11:2)

First, notice Paul's words of praise.

Paul began this section on a positive note. He knew the value of encouraging Christians when they were doing well.

So he said in verse 2: **“Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.”**

Paul was about to address the issue of proper Christian worship. However, before he addressed some of improper practices in their worship he wanted to let them know that he was satisfied that they were putting into practice the teaching that he had previously given to them on other matters. Paul hoped that this positive comment would prepare them for the correction he was about to give.

One area of improper practice in the worship service in the Corinthian church had to do with head coverings. Apparently, some people in the Corinthian church rejected the common practice that wives should cover their heads in public worship. So, Paul addressed the issue with the Corinthians.

Paul was particularly concerned about how men and women behaved in public worship. In fact, Paul had three concerns:

1. He was committed to honoring God by applying the principles of Scripture to worship.
2. He was concerned that Christians show due regard for one another in public worship.
3. He was concerned that the church not damage its witness to a watching world.

In our text for today the apostle Paul focused on how the practice of head coverings for women reflected these three concerns. Why were women to cover their heads in worship? Paul gave three reasons:

1. It was true to divine commands.
2. It honored husbands in worship.
3. It reflected the cultural expectations of decency in their day.

It is helpful to keep in mind that the Greek word *anēr* may refer either to “man” or “husband,” depending on the context. Similarly, the Greek word *gunē* may refer to “woman” or “wife.”⁸ So, Paul’s words may refer to either men and women, husbands and wives, or to both. Generally, in this passage, Paul’s focus was on the behavior of husbands and wives in worship.

II. The Divine Order (11:3)

Second, notice the divine order.

Paul asserted that three parallel relationships exist:

1. Christ is the head of man.
2. The husband is the head of his wife.
3. God (the Father) is the head of Christ.

Notice how Paul put it in verse 3: **“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.”**

Here is one of the places where we find a lot of disagreement. The reason is that Paul did not complete the roles played in these relationships. On the one hand, Paul said there are three heads: Christ, the husband, and God (the Father). But what are the roles played by the man, the wife, and Christ?

Some have argued that **head** in this passage means “source,” as the “head” of a river is the source from which the river flows. In this view, Christ is the source of every man in the sense that Christ created Adam from the dust (Genesis 2:7), men are the source of women in the sense that Eve was taken from Adam (Genesis 2:22), and God the Father is the source of Christ in the sense that Jesus came from the Father (John 16:27-28).

Others have argued that **head** in this passage means “authority,” so that a chain of authority extends from God the Father to Christ, to men, and to their wives.

It seems to me, however, that Paul purposefully did not ex-

⁸ See footnote for 1 Corinthians 11:3 in *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

plain the roles played by the man, the wife, and Christ because the parallels are not precisely the same. Paul's chief concern was *not* to specify what he meant by headship in this passage. His primary concern was much more practical. In this passage, the headships of Christ, men, and God had one thing in common to which he drew attention: *each head should be honored*. This practical concern is seen by the use of the word "dishonors" in verses 4-5. By their actions, men are expected to honor Christ (11:4), and wives are expected to honor their husbands (11:5), just as Christ brings honor to God the Father (John 8:49).

III. Responsibilities to Heads (11:4-12)

Third, let's now look at the responsibilities to their heads.

A. *Men Must Not Cover Their Heads (11:4, 7)*

First, men must not cover their heads.

Paul said in verse 4: **"Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head [that is, Christ]."**

In the Roman Empire, men covered their heads with their togas when they worshiped their pagan gods. This practice may not yet have reached Corinth, but Paul at least warned against adopting this practice in Christian worship.

Paul was saying that for a man to cover his head while worshiping Christ was to worship in the same way that non-Christians worshiped their pagan gods. Imitating this practice introduced pagan worship into Christian worship, and it dishonored Christ, who is the head of every man.

Now, it is very important to note that this was a culturally specific statement. God himself commanded Aaron to wear a head covering (a turban) during worship (Exodus 29:6). And throughout history men have covered their heads for the sake of warmth and even decoration.

The principle that we draw from Paul is that we must not in-

introduce pagan practices into our worship because that will dishonor Christ.

B. Women Must Cover Their Heads (11:5-6)

Second, women, or more likely, wives, must cover their heads.

Paul said in verse 5a: **“But every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head [that is, her husband].”**

In the Roman Empire, it is said that women wore head coverings in order to honor their husbands. However, that may not have been the case in Corinth. Nevertheless, it was a practice that Paul wanted the women in the church at Corinth to practice, as a way of honoring their husbands.

Paul said that if a wife did not cover her head, **it was the same as if her head were shaven** (11:5b). Paul may have been referring to the custom in that day of punishing adulterous women by shaving their heads. This would have brought shame not only to the woman, but, if she was married, to her husband as well. And so Paul argued that **“since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head”** (11:6b).

C. Reasons for the Differences between Men and Women (11:7-12)

And third, notice the reasons for the differences between men and women.

Regarding the men, Paul said in verse 7a: **“For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God.”**

Adam was created first by God out of the dust, and therefore he held a special status as **the image and glory of God**. **“For,”** as Paul said in verses 8-9, **“man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.”**

Regarding women, Paul said in verse 7b, **“But woman is the glory of man.”**

Paul did not mean that woman is not the glory of God, for all of creation is the glory of God (Romans 11:36). More likely, he meant that woman is the glory of both God and man, and not just God. **“That is why,”** Paul said in verse 10a, **“a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head.”** In the Greek, this phrase is more accurately rendered as, “A wife ought to have authority on her head.” Paul meant that women ought to act responsibly in the matter of head coverings by wearing one.

Paul also argued that a woman ought to have authority on her head **because of the angels** (11:10b). Some Bible scholars say that **angels** here refer to actual celestial beings. The New Testament seems to suggest in the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation that angels actually attend local churches and represent the church to God (Revelation 2:1; 3:14). If Paul was referring to these kinds of angels, then he meant that celestial angels watched the worship at Corinth and reported it to God.

Other Bible scholars say that **angels** here may be translated as “messengers,” referring to human messengers (see Luke 9:52; Acts 12:15). If Paul was referring to human messengers, then he may have been warning the Corinthians to watch their worship because there were messengers who reported to him what was taking place in their worship, and he would hold them accountable.

IV. Cultural Considerations (11:13-16)

Finally, let’s observe cultural considerations.

A. The Need for Judgment and Discernment (11:13-15)

First, the need for judgment and discernment.

Paul asked in verse 13: **“Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?”**

Paul urged the Corinthians to judge for themselves. This may

have been a rhetorical nudge to get them to think more clearly about this matter for themselves.

And so, rather than making a statement or issuing a command, Paul asked a question about the propriety of head coverings. As regenerate children of God, their desire would be to do what God was calling them to do. So, they did not want their public worship of God to be corrupted and thereby damage their witness to the world.

And then Paul asked another question in verses 14-15: **“Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.”**

Paul expected the Corinthians to recognize that men should have short hair and women have long hair. He also expected them to see that the glory of women’s long hair implied the propriety of women’s head coverings in public worship.

B. The Practice of the Church (11:16)

And second, the practice of the church.

Paul expected some resistance to his argument. So, he said in verse 16: **“If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such [meaning, other] practice, nor do the churches of God.”**

Paul’s point was that he, other church leaders, and **the churches of God** have **no other practice** than having women cover their heads in public worship. This widespread practice should have caused all dissenters to hesitate in their resistance to Paul’s teaching.

Conclusion

Let me suggest some points of application.

First, we honor God when we worship him according to the principles he gives us. In chapters 12-14 Paul sets down biblical principles to guide the people of God to worship him correctly.

When worshipping God we must always look to Scripture first in order to understand and apply biblical principles to our worship of God. We are not free to make up our own rules for worship. In reformed churches, we believe that we are to worship God according to the Regulative Principle of Worship. That simply means that our worship of God is regulated, or guided, by the Word of God.

Second, there is a divine order regarding worship. God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife. In all of creation, God has established an order. In the context of worship, we see that Christ honored God by doing all that the Father called him to do. Every man honors Christ by worshipping him in a way that is biblical and not pagan. And a wife honors her husband by acting like a woman and not like a man in worship.

And third, cultural standards are relevant to worship practices. The Corinthian Christians were not to act like pagans in the way in which they worshiped God. For the men that meant that they did not have to cover their heads in worship. For the women that meant that they would not act like men, and so they would cover their heads in worship.

In our particular cultural setting, a wife does not cover her head in worship in order to honor her husband. That may still be true in other parts of the world, but it is not true in New Tampa. So, it is not necessary for a woman to cover her head in worship in our culture. She simply needs to honor her husband by worshipping Christ in a way that does not draw attention to herself.

May God help us to order our public worship so that we honor Christ and one another. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Lord Jesus, we are people who love to worship you while we ignore the needs and honor of other people. Grant us grace to see how you want all of us, men and women, young and old, to worship you in ways that honor you and those around us.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve the only true God who is faithful.