

1 Corinthians 11:2-16
Genesis 1:26:2:25
Psalm 128

“Head Coverings”

July 27, 2014

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul speaks of how man and woman are related.

He draws heavily on Genesis 1-2.

In Genesis 1:27

“God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created *him*;
male and female he created *them*.”

adam (man) plainly includes both male and female.

And God blessed them – and called them to “be fruitful and multiply
and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea
and over the birds of the heavens
and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (1:28)

Then in chapter 2, Genesis explains *how* God created man and woman.

The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground,
and then, after Adam had named all the creatures,
he formed – he built – Eve from the side of Adam,
to be a suitable helper for him.

The word translated “helper” does *not* mean “assistant” or “subordinate.”
The word “helper” is always used to refer to someone who does something for you
that you could not possibly do for yourself.

That’s why *God* is often referred to as “my helper” by the Psalmists!

Animals might be useful assistants or subordinates for Adam.
But no animal could *help* him to do what God had called him to do.
Indeed, Adam was help-*less* to do one thing in particular!

How can Adam be fruitful and multiply?
He needs someone to make babies with!
Eve does *more* than just make babies.
But her ability to reproduce the human race (together with Adam)
is at the heart of how Eve is a suitable helper for Adam.

“in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman;
for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman.”

We sing of this in our Psalm of response, Psalm 128.

Sing Psalm 128
Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

I don't always give you my conclusion right up front,
but on a sticky issue like this one, it might help!

Paul is saying that men should not wear head coverings (or have long hair)
when they pray and prophesy,
while women should wear head coverings (or have long hair)
when they pray and prophesy.

There are three parts to Paul's argument –
creation, redemption, and custom –
each of which is important in its own way.
Paul is not just talking about a local situation in Corinth,
his principles speak to every church in every age.

Christian men should look like men.

Christian women should look like women.

Paul does not define how long "long hair" is –
so we don't need to be contentious about it –
indeed, Paul concludes this section by saying that the churches of God
do not have a tendency to be contentious.

So if you are inclined to be contentious –
and you are always bickering about something –
stop it!

That's not the way of love (or of truth)!

Introduction: The Proper Place for Tradition (11:2)

Paul brackets his discussion of head coverings and gender
with comments on the proper place for tradition and custom in the church.

Verse 2 sounds quite encouraging:

² Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.

Of course, in verse 17, Paul will say "I do not commend you" (and again in verse 22),
so many have thought that Paul is being ironic – or even sarcastic! –
but remember that Paul is responding to a letter from Corinth.

Probably they already knew that Paul would not be happy with some of their practices,
so they probably made a point of highlighting all the areas
where their practice conformed to Paul's teaching!

I think that we certainly have to see at least a *touch* of irony –
after all, there are *many things* where they are *not* maintaining the traditions!
But Paul is sincerely commending them for their efforts.

We've seen throughout the epistle that Paul will change his tone based on the seriousness of the issue.

Paul knows that he will have to rebuke them for certain departures in practice (e.g., verses 17-22!), so he takes the opportunity to commend them – to praise them – here, partly in order to set up the contrast between faithfulness and infidelity.

Here he praises them because they remember his instruction – and they are maintaining the traditions as he delivered them.

Sometimes Protestants shy away from the word “tradition” – but we shouldn't!

Tradition is a perfectly good thing.

Paul says that the church *should* maintain the apostolic traditions.

After all, the apostles' teaching *is* the standard for the church.

The apostles' handed down this teaching and practice, and commanded Timothy, Titus, and others to “hand down” the teaching and practice to faithful men who would then instruct others.

And this is why we pay attention to what the early church said and did: because while scripture is the only *infallible rule* of faith and life, we should certainly pay attention to those who lived closer to their time and place. If we read the Bible as though it were written yesterday, we will likely come up with some odd views!

1. The Principle of Headship: Marriage Was Designed to Reflect Something about God (v3)

In verse 3, Paul lays out the basic principle of headship.

³ *But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife^[a] is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.*

If you want to understand what Paul is saying in this chapter then you need to keep in mind this foundational principle: there is an analogy between marriage and the Trinity (particularly the relationship of God and Christ, Christ and man, man and woman).

There is order in the relationship between the Father and the Son, as Jesus says: “I came to do the will of my Father.”

But there is also mutuality, as Jesus says: “I and the Father are one.”

Paul is not an egalitarian – he sees differences between the genders (and between the Father and the Son); but neither is Paul a subordinationist –

“it is not an involuntary or imposed ‘subordination,’
but an example of shared love.” (Thiselton, 804)

There has been a lot of debate over the meaning of the word “head.”

In one sense, the meaning is simple: it means “head” (the object that sits on your neck)!
But “head,” in Greek, also has a metaphorical use to express the idea of leader or ruler –
focusing on the idea preeminence
(just as your head directs your body).

There are some who argue that head can mean “source” or “origin,”
but Greek literature simply doesn’t bear this out.

Wayne Grudem did a search of 36 Greek authors
who use the word “head” over 2,000 times –
but *never* did it express the idea of source
(except when talking about the “head” of a river –
and no one thinks that Paul is using a river-image here!).

Just as your head is “topmost” on the body,
so also the metaphorical use of “head” focuses on preeminence and authority.
Both in Hebrew and in Greek, the leader (or chief) of a town or region is called a “head.”

Another challenge in translating this passage
is that the word “man” is also the word translated “husband”
and the word “woman” is also the word translated “wife.”

So you could translate verse 3 very woodenly as,
“the head of every man is the Christ, the head of a woman is the man,
and the head of Christ is the God.”

Or you could say,
“the head of every husband is Christ, the head of a wife is the husband,
and the head of Christ is God.

Which is it?

I think the ESV is on the right track in its attempt to translate it in different ways.

Some have tried to argue that *every woman* must have a man as her head.

The problem is that Paul doesn’t talk like this elsewhere.

He speaks of Phoebe as his patron (in Romans 16).

Lydia had her own household (in Acts 16).

(Roman law *had once* required every woman to have a guardian,
but that was changing in Paul’s day).

I think the ESV is right to focus on *married women*.

John Chrysostom notes that “head” does communicate the idea of “primacy,”
but both God and Christ on one side, and men and women on the other,
are of the same mode of being.

“For had Paul meant to speak of rule and subjection...

he would not have brought forward the instance of a woman (or wife),
but rather of a slave and a master....
It is a wife (or woman) as free, as equal in honour;
and the Son also, though He did become obedient to the Father,
it was as the Son of God.” (quoted in AT, 819)

Chrysostom points out that Paul is using analogy here –
he's not insisting that each relationship is identical!

And the analogy focuses on the connection in each relationship.

As Christ is to every man,
so is a husband to his wife,
and so is God to Christ.

And, to go back to the root metaphor,
so is a head to a body.

Paul will flesh this out in Ephesians 5
when he points out that no one abuses his own body –
(at least, no one who is thinking *rightly*!)
the head directs and leads the body for the good of the whole person.

So, what is Paul doing in 1 Corinthians 11?

Paul uses the language of headship –
but he doesn't go on to talk about marriage, authority, or submission.
Instead he talks about honor and dishonor, disgrace and glory.

In other words, Paul is talking about how your actions before others reflect on your head.
What you do, and how you do it,
will either honor or dishonor the one under whom you live.

The head of every man is Christ.
How he lives and walks reflects on Christ.
The head of a wife is her husband.
How she lives and walks reflects on her husband.
The head of Christ is God.
How he lived and walked reflected on God.

The point in 1 Corinthians 11 is not “submission and authority” –
but honor and glory.
And that is at the heart of Paul's discussion of the practice of head coverings in v4-6.

2. Statement of Practice: Head Coverings Are All about Honor and Dishonor (v4-6)

⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵ but every wife^[b] who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.

In chapters 11-14 we are talking about matters of worship.

Here in chapter 11, Paul speaks of women (or wives) praying and prophesying.
In chapter 14, Paul will speak of women remaining silent in the worship service –
where he says that it is “shameful for a woman to speak in church”
(literally, in the assembly).

So there are two things that need to be held together.
Women *may* and *should* pray and prophesy.
But women should not speak in the assembly.

1 Corinthians 14 is plainly dealing with the liturgical assembly –
where the church is gathered for word and sacrament.

Indeed, you can see the transition in 11:18 –
“when you come together as a church.”

Therefore, the sort of praying and prophesying in view here in the first part of chapter 11
is *not* the praying and prophesying of the liturgical assembly.

I like Anthony Thiselton’s description of prophecy:

“Prophetic speech may include *applied theological teaching, encouragement,
and exhortation to build the church.*” (p826)

Prophecy has very little to do with “predicting the future.”

Prophets are those who reflect on what God has said in the past,
and proclaim his message to the present.

If you think back to the OT prophets,
there were many “good” prophets who never wrote Scripture.

Not every prophet was inspired by God.

Prophecy simply means teaching, encouragement and exhortation in the way of Christ.

And every Christian is a prophet in the most basic sense of the term.

We are all prophets, priests, and kings in Christ.

Joel 2:28-29 had said that when the Spirit was poured out on all flesh,

“your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.”

We’ll talk more about this in chapters 12-14.

People tend to focus on *women* in this discussion.

But Paul is very clear in verse 4 that he is equally concerned with men.

And the basic point is about honor and dishonor.

The first problem that Paul identifies

is that of *men* praying or prophesying with covered heads.

The phrase that Paul uses in verse 4 could mean either “head covering” or “long hair.”

I’m not going to get into the debate - let me give you just a sampling:

some think that Paul is dealing with “long-haired” homosexuals;

others think that Paul is dealing with the Roman practice of men wearing coverings
in liturgical assemblies;
others think that Paul is rejecting the Jewish prayer shawl.

It's not clear to me that any of these are compelling.
Paul doesn't explain *whose* practice he is objecting to.
Rather, he articulates a *positive* rationale for the practice he is calling *us* to observe!

Paul is saying,
Think about who God is.
How does Christ honor God?
That's how a man should honor Christ.
That's how a wife should honor her husband.

So *when* a man prays and prophesies –
(in Sunday school, in bible studies, in everyday life) –
he should honor Christ in every way –
even in his gendered hair style.

Even so, *when* a woman prays and prophesies –
(in Sunday school, in bible studies, in everyday life) –
she should honor her husband in every way –
even in her gendered hair style.

Verse 6 explains why:

⁶ *For 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.*

Deuteronomy 21:12 talks about shaving the hair of a female captive
who was to be married to an Israelite.

The image is of a woman who is exchanging her former “head” for an Israelite “head.”

Certainly in Roman culture, a head covering demonstrated that you were a respectable woman.

While the precise issues in Corinth may not be entirely clear
the argument that Paul uses is that the *honor* due to your “head”
requires you to demonstrate this *visibly*.

Does this strike you as majoring on minors?

“Why does Paul care about my hair? Doesn't he have better things to do?!”
“Isn't this just ‘cultural’? Who cares?!”

Our culture has become too individualistic.

We want the freedom to do whatever we want,
and we don't care what that does to anyone else!

But how you dress, and what you eat, and how you cut your hair
does affect others!

You need to understand what message you are communicating in your conduct,
because all these ‘little’ things speak volumes.

And you see this in the “rationale” for the practice in verses 7-12.

3. The Reason for the Practice: Image and Glory (v7-12)

a. “Woman from Man...and for Man” (v7-9)

⁷ *For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.*

Paul says that man is “the image and glory of God,
but woman is the glory of man.”

This does not mean that woman is *not* the image of God –
rather, it expresses the fact that both within God himself –
and within humanity – there is both unity and diversity.

God is one –
and yet the Son is the glory of the Father.
So also humanity (adam) is one –
and yet woman is the glory of man.

The way that Christ relates to God
is expressed in a picture by the way that a wife relates to her husband.
But this picture is not distantly related.
The analogy is connected even more intimately by the incarnation of Christ.

What connects God and man is none other than Jesus Christ,
the one who is God and man in one person.

That is why Christ is the mediator between God and man.
In his humanity, he is head of man.
In his divinity, his head is the Father.

Verses 8-9 articulate the principle from creation:

⁸ *For man was not made from woman, but woman from man.* ⁹ *Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.*

God built Eve from Adam’s side –
she was created “from man.”
And likewise, she was created “for man” –
she was created in order to help him do what he could not possibly do by himself.

Proverbs 12:4 says that “an excellent wife is the crown of her husband.”

She is the “glory” of man.

Husbands, your wife is *your glory!*

How are you treating your glory?

Are you letting her shine?

Her radiance and splendor should make you look good!

And of course, the primary point that Paul is addressing here is that her *praying and prophesying* would honor you – just as your praying and prophesying honors Christ.

Many of you have benefited from Ginger’s praying and prophesying.

b. “Because of the Angels”? (v10)

Verse 10 has been a challenging verse for interpreters ever since Tertullian, 1800 years ago!

¹⁰ *That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.* ^[c]

Literally, it reads, that a woman “ought to have *authority* on her head, because of the angels.”

Most commentators have assumed that this “authority on her head”

refers to the long hair (or covering) –

and most assume that this is a sign that she is *under* authority.

But why “because of the angels”?

Angels are often seen in scripture as the guardians of order

and also as participants in the heavenly assembly.

The reason why a woman ought to have a sign authority on her head

is because she is the glory of man.

It is not a sign of “submission” –

but a sign of honor.

Paul has already told the Corinthians,

“Do you not know that we will judge angels?” (1 Cor 6:3)

Women are not under the scrutiny of angels!

It would be more accurate to say that the wife has a sign of authority

in order to demonstrate that she is superior to angels in the heavenly assembly.

After all, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,

the Word was not birthed by an angel,

but by a woman!

c. “Man Is now Born of Woman” (v11-12)

¹¹ *Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman;* ¹² *for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.*

When Paul says “in the Lord,” he regularly refers to the Lord Jesus.

So when Paul says that “as woman was made from man” (a reference to Adam and Eve),

he also adds that now “man is born of woman” (a reference to Jesus and Mary).
It’s certainly true that *all men* are born of woman!
No man can claim independence of woman
(any more than a woman could claim independence from man).
But the promise to Eve was that her seed – the seed of the woman –
would crush the head of the serpent.

And that promise has been fulfilled in Jesus –
the one who was born of the virgin.

In our culture, the individual has declared independence from everyone and everything.
But in the Lord Jesus, woman is not independent from man nor man of woman.
In Jesus, God has joined himself to our humanity.

4. The “Nature” of Long Hair (v13-15)

In verses 13-15, then, Paul suggests that the Corinthians themselves
render judgment on his argument:

¹³ Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, ¹⁵ but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

Having used arguments from creation and redemption,
Paul also appeals to “nature.”

“Does not nature itself teach you...”

Many have been perplexed by this, because they think of “nature” as “the created order”
and quite frankly, it would be impossible to see how the “natural order”
demonstrates that a man with long hair is a disgrace!

The word “phusis” (translated, nature) refers to “the way things are.”

It often refers to the way things are *in the created order*,

but it can also refer to the way things are in society.

We’ve been looking at the *principles* found in creation – with Adam and Even.
We’ve seen the *principles* found in the incarnation of the Son of God.

Now Paul turns to the application and says that “the way things are” in Corinth
clearly suggests that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him.

He uses the same sort of language of “disgrace” and “glory,”
concluding that if a man wears long hair, it is a disgrace for *him*,
and if a woman has long hair, it is her glory.

Paul is not attempting to set a standard hair cut for all generations.
The principle is simply that women should look like women,

and men should look like men.
Just as Christ honors the Father,
so also a wife should honor her husband.
Paul doesn't address the question of widows or singles or children –
because he isn't concerned about minutiae in this area
(remember in chapters 5-7, he spent 3 chapters on sexual ethics,
covering all sorts of different categories of people!)
Here he simply wants to get at the principle.

That's why he says "judge for yourselves..." –
figure out how to apply this in all the details of life.
It may work out somewhat differently in different cultures –
but what is common to human societies is that men and women should be distinct.

I should note that the word used at the end of verse 15 "covering"
is a different word than is used in the rest of the chapter.
This suggests that Paul is saying that a woman does not need to wear an *extra* covering.
If she has long hair
(in other words, if she has a feminine haircut)
then she does not need to wear a hair covering.
Her long hair (her feminine haircut) is her glory.

Conclusion: The Place of Tradition in the Churches (v16)

Verse 16 concludes this section with a warning:

¹⁶ If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

Remember that verse 2 demonstrates that the Corinthians are maintaining the *right practice* here.
Paul writes this in order to encourage them to continue in the right path,
and to warn those who love quarrelling to knock it off.

The word "contentious" has as its root, the idea of "a lover of victory."
I'm sure you've encountered someone like this!
Someone who always wants to win a debate –
they almost don't care what the topic is
"Ooh, is there a fight? Let me in!"

Paul says, No, there are some things that just shouldn't matter.
The churches of God do not have a practice of delighting in quarrels and conflict.
Paul has given an outline of the basic principles
that should govern our views of man and woman in Christ.
If you disagree and want to be contentious about this,
then Paul has no desire to continue the debate.

Those who want to know the truth will listen to the truth.
Those who just want to quarrel will never be satisfied.

You might say that this is Paul's version of Proverbs 26:4-5 –
“Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.
Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.”

There comes a point where you have to say,
“If you want to keep fighting, go ahead. I'm done.”

As we've seen throughout 1 Corinthians,
Paul is concerned that too often we are obsessed with getting what we want –
with being “in control” –
with insisting on “my rights.”

This is what will result in his glorious hymn on Love in chapter 13!
But the foundation for that chapter is being laid all throughout his exhortations to us,
as he calls us to imitate him, as he imitates Christ.