

“Hats, Hair and Holiness”

(Worship; Women)

I Corinthians 11:1-16

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Introduce the text: I Corinthians 11:2-16

As I read I want you to follow along in your Bible.

Given the contemporary debate about the roles of women, what you are about to read is one of the more interesting passages in the Bible.

Any novice ship's navigator could tell you we are sailing into dangerous waters in this text.

Follow carefully and see if you can discern the Apostle Paul's main point.

READ 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 “I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. ³ Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵ And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. ⁶ If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. ⁷ A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹ neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. ¹¹ In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹² For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. ¹³ Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵ but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. ¹⁶ If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

Now if you were a Christian in the church in Corinth, Greece, and you read this part of Paul's letter what would you conclude you and others in the church were supposed to do or not do?

Men are not supposed to wear coverings on their heads when they lead in worship and women must wear head coverings when they lead in worship.

It is tempting to end the sermon right now but I can't be let off that easily on such a misunderstood and abused passage of the Bible.

Does Paul really mean that all women everywhere are supposed to wear hats or veils or shawls over their hair when they worship God?

Isn't this the kind of text that gives the Bible a bad reputation?

Others read it and conclude the Bible is hopelessly archaic.

They can't believe or won't believe that hair and head coverings have anything to do with God and worship and the relationships between men and women.

Well, do they?

Let's go a little further and answer the obvious question:

Why? Why shouldn't men wear head coverings and why should women wear them?

I want you to trace Paul's discussion with me for a minute - just a quick overview of the text:

After praising them in V 2 Paul starts his instruction in V 3 with an observation of fact:

the head of every man is Christ
The head of woman is man
and the head of Christ is God.

In that verse Paul has used the word "head" not literally as in one's physical head that sits on your shoulders but he has used the word "head" metaphorically - meaning one's "authority" or the one who gives direction.

Now in Vv 4&5 he uses the word "head" in both ways (literally and metaphorically):

If a man covers his head he dishonors his head - Christ.

And if a woman doesn't cover her head she dishonors her head - man.

V 6 For a woman not to cover her head is like having it shaved off.

And since that is a disgrace - women are to keep their heads covered.

V 7 You see, a man shouldn't cover his head because he is the glory of God (by not covering his head he somehow honors God).

And a woman should cover her head because she is the glory of man (by covering her head she somehow honors man).

Now I hope to demonstrate that in the context before us "man" means the male leadership in the church.

And Vv 8-9 she is to honor male leadership for two reasons:

1. Woman was created out of man - after him.
And 2. she was created as man's helper.

So V 10 Even the angels would agree she should cover her head as a sign of being under authority.

But Vv 11-12 Don't you men get carried away with the idea of authority - Instead remember your interdependence.

There is full equality between men and women in the church even if there is a difference in function or role.

But to summarize Vv13-15 Women should cover their heads in worship because even the nature of things, custom itself, teaches us that men have shorter hair and women have longer hair -

Even women's longer hair proves that unlike men, women need a covering.

And V 16 Paul closes by asking them not to be contentious about this because this is the way it is in all God's churches.

There you have it again: Men don't wear head coverings in worship and women do. Why? Because wearing head coverings in that culture said something about submission to authority.

SO WHY DON'T WOMEN IN THIS CHURCH ALWAYS WEAR SOMETHING ON THEIR HEADS WHEN THEY LEAD IN WORSHIP?

When they sing in the choir,
or lead in prayer,
or speak?

Almost without exception Bible scholars agree that wearing a head covering was a requirement in that culture at that time and shouldn't be necessarily applied to our culture and our time.

How can they say that?

Consider this: Most teaching in the Bible is of three parts:
The rationale or basis, the principle, the application

For example: The rationale is that because we have been so loved
the principle is we ought to love one another and
the applications are that we should help each other
physically when needed, or we should listen to each other or
we should forgive each other etc.

Likewise in I Corinthians 11 there is a rationale for what Paul says - there are stated reasons for why or what he is saying.

Secondly there are principles that Paul is teaching that cross time and culture and

Thirdly there is an application - "do or don't wear head coverings".

In a few minutes you will see that it was because of the culture in which they lived that Paul took the principle he stated and applied it to head coverings.

If the culture had been different Paul would have had different applications for them.

We saw that last week when we looked at "eating meat offered to idols". The principle in the passage was "liberty constrained by love".

While the application of "not eating meat offered to idols" was not relevant to us the principle behind it was very relevant and we applied it in other ways, to fit our culture.

It's interesting in this text (chapter 11) Paul doesn't make the wearing of head coverings sound anything at all like an application for all time:

In fact he specifically says in verses 13-16 that he wants the women to wear head coverings because that is "proper"(v13), it is the "nature of things", the custom (v14) and it is the "practice" at that time in the churches (v16).

Those are very relative words - words based on what is happening at the time.

No, Paul is not saying all women everywhere have to wear head coverings.

Also, Paul knows that the length of hair and hair coverings are not timeless issues to be applied in every age - he couldn't have forgotten about the Nazarite vow in the Bible in which men in devotion to God wore their hair long.

And so again, there is no basis for suggesting that God through the Apostle Paul is telling women everywhere and for all time to wear head coverings when leading in worship.

Well if Paul isn't saying women have to wear head coverings, of what value is the passage?

The value is in the PRINCIPLES behind the applications.

What I offer to you next I offer humbly, not because I lack conviction about what I believe but because I recognize other godly men and women hold a different view than what I offer here today:

PRINCIPLE Number ONE (1)

When women lead in worship they are to do so under male authority.

Now clearly that raises the issue of gender distinctions in roles in the church. Can I support that?

In verse 4 Paul tells us, in that culture, if men covered their heads in worship it was disrespectful to the one in authority over them.

But he says that to build his case for what is his main emphasis in the passage: how women were acting in public worship.

And so in verse 5 he tells us, in that culture, if women led in worship with their heads uncovered it was disrespectful or dishonoring to the ones in authority over them.

What is Paul's point: Act in ways consistent with your being under someone else's authority.

Now if verses 3 & 7 weren't in the text it would look like both men and women are to be certain they honor the Lord's authority when they lead in worship.

But verses 3 & 7 are in the text and they indicate when it comes to honoring the Lord's ultimate authority over his church - the way women do that looks different than the way men do it.

Verse 3 explains verses 4 & 5:

Now some of you here are familiar with the arguments being presented in some quarters today that suggest that the word "head" in verse 3 means "source" not "authority".

But I am convinced the whole rationale of this passage rises or falls on there being a God-created difference between authority and subordination of men and women in the church.

Define the word "head" as "source" and I think you make gobbledygook of the whole passage.

So V 4 -The "head" or the authority over the male leadership in the church is Christ.

And V 5 - the "head" or authority over women in the church is the male leadership.

Now remember the context for this instruction is public worship in the church.

We are not here discussing man/woman relationships at work or even in the home - though the latter of those is specifically addressed in Eph 5 and elsewhere in the N.T.

But here the issue I think is specifically the relationship of women to male leadership in the church.

And women as well as the other men are called on to submit to and honor the proper use of authority by the male leadership.

Looking at verse 7 we find the same issue:

The best understanding of the use of the word "glory" in that verse is to think of it as honoring someone.

Men are to honor the Lord and the women are to honor the men (and I think the context makes it plain that "men" here is referring to the male leadership in the church.

And why is it women are to honor male leadership?

Look at verses 8-9. Paul goes clear back to creation to argue that women have a responsibility to respect proper male authority in the church.

Please notice Paul is not using verses 8-9 to support his "application" that women ought to wear head coverings.

He is using these verses to support his "principle" that when women lead in worship they are to do so under male authority.

And how does he support that principle: First of all, Paul reminds us, because woman was created out of man.

If you remember the creation account in Genesis 2 you remember that woman was created second and created from a part of the man. Man was created first.

Secondly, Paul again refers to Genesis 2 and notes, woman was created to be a suitable helper for man and not the reverse.

Though I don't pretend to understand it as well as some claim to, there is something about when woman was created and why she was created that Paul uses as the rationale for his principle that

there is a God-created difference in the authority of men and women in the church.

His point again is that in public worship women are under the authority of proper male leadership and are to respect and honor that authority rather than disregard it.

What does that look like in this church today?
How is that principle to be applied?

We believe and we practice from this passage and from other passages such as I Timothy 2&3 that men and only men may be the elders of the church.

And all women, as well as the other men, are under the authority of those male leaders.

Now I hope you have noticed that almost everytime I have said "male leadership" I have said, "proper male leadership".
For nowhere are women or men to disobey God in order to obey men.

Nowhere is male leadership given any authority but the authority to serve and love and model Christ's love to those under them.

And so in this church the women don't attempt to usurp the authority of the elders.

And they don't attempt to position themselves as elders.

To do that would be to violate the order God intended in his church.

Now believe me I am keenly aware that what I have just said is anathema to many in our culture and even to some in evangelical churches.

And I believe the most significant reason for the differences between what the evangelical feminists are saying and what I've said this morning is a misunderstanding of the idea of "Equal but subordinate".

Most people today have a hard time understanding that two people can be equal in being, equal in importance, equal in value, and yet one be subordinate to the other.

Most often this concept is expressed in terms of "equal in being and yet subordinate in function or role."

Jesus, in John 5, had no trouble with this concept.
He was equal to the Father in being and yet subordinate to Him in function.

Look at I Cor 15:28 READ

Clearly Paul likewise understood this concept.
He saw no contradiction in calling Jesus fully God, equal to the Father (which he does in many passages of Scripture) and yet saying Jesus was subject to the Father.

My point is that if Jesus can be "equal yet subordinate" so can we.

Craig Blomberg wrote: "There is no evidence that any human society or any Christian community has ever functioned successfully without (some kind of) duly recognized authorities to whom others submit.

Most Christians have regularly experienced situations in which they submit to authorities with whom they believe they are nevertheless equal."
(I Corinthians)

Equal? Yes! Subordinate? Yes!

There is a God-ordained order in the church and in the home - male leadership.

And when exercised properly that is not a burden or an evil but a wonderful and freeing relationship.

Now Paul is a very practical writer (of course he had the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God assisting him).

And so Paul adds the tempering remarks of Vv 11-12 READ

Paul reminds his readers that while male leadership in the church is God-ordained those leaders (and everyone for that matter) must remember that proper male leadership in the church (or in the home) gives no room for authoritarian, abusive, domineering attitudes or conduct.

Under God, men and women are interdependent - a theme he will stress in Chapter 12 when he discusses the gifts, the spiritual abilities all of God's people, men and women, possess.

When it comes to gifts of the Spirit- there are no gender distinctions.

Some people confuse gifts and offices.

Women may not be able to hold the office of Elder in the church but they can exercise every God-given gift, including, as this passage indicates, praying and preaching in public (cf V5).

So since they recognize their interdependence with women, male leaders will understand that leadership means servanthood - it is a leadership that cares least about self and most about others.

Leadership that always acts for the good of the followers.

And so again we are back to the basic principle:

When women lead in worship they are to do so under male authority.

The other principle I want you to think about is this:

How we dress should not detract from our worship or our witness.

Apparently in Corinth, the Christian women, in their "freedom", were refusing to wear head coverings.

They were probably thinking they were no longer under rules of any kind now that they were Christians - saved by grace not works - they could do as they pleased -

Just as they were quoted by Paul as saying back in chapter 10 - "Everything is permissible".

All women in that culture wore head coverings.

But contrary to the custom of their culture some of the Christian women came to worship and even led in worship with no head coverings.

To not wear a head covering in that culture was to act like a man.

It blurred the gender distinctions God created.

God created men and women. He created the genders as distinct.

We must not try to obliterate those distinctions by what we wear and make it confusing for someone as to whether we are trying to be male or female.

Men are to be men and women are to be women and Christian men and women are to wear the culturally appropriate clothing to indicate that.

Does that mean women can't wear slacks?

In our culture, wearing slacks doesn't indicate a woman is trying to be a man.

She can still be very much a woman and wear slacks.

But she crosses the line when she or others observing her lose sight of her God-given distinctiveness of being a woman.

There's something instinctively objectionable about Boy George or Michael Jackson, or when Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis dress as women.

No, Paul says, don't blur the distinctions between the sexes.

To not wear a head covering in that culture was to act like a man.
And to not wear a head covering, in that culture, symbolized rebellion against authority.

It said volumes to the observer about a woman's attitude toward her husband and toward male leadership.

And in that day to not wear a head covering sent a message about a woman's morals.

And when there was confusion about her morals it affected a woman's leadership in her worship and her ability to witness.

Back in Chapters 8-10 Paul had made it clear that the Christians had liberty in non-moral issues (and clearly wearing or not wearing a veil would be in and of itself a non-moral issue) BUT PAUL HAD ALSO TAUGHT
don't use your liberty to hurt others - Liberty is tempered with love.

Every culture has socially accepted standards of dress for men and for women.
And when a Christian man or woman ignores those standards and dresses too much like the opposite sex or dresses too suggestively they do two things:

They hinder the worship of others whom they distract with their dress.

And they hinder their witness when they dress that way in front of unbelievers.

Why? Because they send contradictory messages.

With their words they say they want to lead others in worship but they are so distracting by their dress that others are hindered from worship.

Or by their words they say they believe in the authority of Jesus over their lives but their dress says they are rebellious or immoral.

No, Paul says, dress within the culturally acceptable standards of your day and don't push the limits either way -

Your purpose is not to attract or repulse or deny your gender,
your purpose is to worship and to witness to the saving love of Jesus.

What should you wear? Let "liberty with love" be your guide.

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