

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

12 Keep Your Hat On

Scripture Reading

1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16

So Far

In the later chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul continues to deal with matters that were causing concern in the church at Corinth. Chapters 8 to 10 deal with some of the issues that can arise when Christians live in a culture where idolatry is rife. The first part of chapter 11, which we are going to look at this evening, addresses the behaviour of women when Christians gather for worship.

This is probably the most difficult passage to understand in the epistle and indeed there are those who would say it is the most difficult passage in the entire New Testament. Yet, in spite of its acknowledged difficulties, one of the matters it addresses — the wearing of head-coverings — has been a cause of hot contention in churches in Portadown for more than forty years. Churches have divided over it and the contention still continues.

Two matters are touched upon: the wearing of head-coverings and participation in worship by women. This evening we will confine our discussion to the matter of head-coverings. We will look at the things which are clear in the passage. Then we will look at the parts which are not clear and various possible ways of understanding them. Lastly we will think about the practical implications of it all. But before we do any of that it will be useful to know something about the culture of Corinth in the days when Paul was writing.

The Culture Of Corinth

Apparently dress for the men and women of Corinth was similar except that the women wore a head-covering: not a veil but a covering for the hair alone. The only women who did not wear a head-covering were the mistresses of influential Corinthians and the prostitutes of the temple of Aphrodite, of whom there were 1000 employed by the city council. Female slaves and convicted adulteresses had their heads shaved. So, in normal everyday life decent women wore head-coverings and any woman who did not was clearly a woman of ill-repute.

Men did not cover their heads, unless they were engaged in pagan worship when pious men would wear their togas “down from the head.”

Why there should have been any question about Corinthian women having their heads covered when the church assembled for worship we have no idea. Some think the worship was getting out of hand and the women in their ecstasy were losing control and allowing their head-coverings to fall off. Others say it was a sign of an emerging feminist movement: the women claiming equal status with the men. Perhaps it was a misunderstanding of teaching given by Paul on a previous occasion along the lines of Galatians 3:28 (...there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus) that led to it. It might even be that some of the women were prostitutes who had been converted and who were continuing their previous practice of going bareheaded. We just do not know, for we are not told, but you can see that if the practice of wearing a head-covering had been abandoned by some of the women of the church in Corinth it could, apart from anything else, have tarnished the reputation of the whole church.

What Is Clear

1. There Is An Order To Be Observed

It seems to me that the underlying principle upon which Paul's argument is based is clear. It is laid down in verse 3.

“But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”

There is debate about what exactly is meant by the word “head” but if there could be any doubt it is resolved by the last phrase. Man is the head of woman in the same way that God is the head of Christ. There is no implied inferiority on the part of women, any more than Christ is inferior to God. Rather, in God's order of

things men are pre-eminent and women voluntarily submit to their authority and accept their leadership as the Lord Jesus Christ does that of His Father.

There are those who argue that “head” means “source,” but apparently no serious scholar of the Greek language would accept that view: they are merely trying to remove the idea of authority from the passage because they find it embarrassing. But do note that authority is not the primary idea here. This is a statement about decent and proper order in the church: about who has pre-eminence. It should not be taken to imply that every man in the church has authority over every woman. A woman is subject only to the authority of her own husband or, if she is single, the head of her family.

The structure of the sentence is significant. By placing the headship of man over woman in the middle I believe Paul is emphasising that this is part of an overall order of things in which everyone is under the headship of someone. And, lest anyone should have misunderstood, Paul returns to the subject of the relative status of men and women in verses 11 and 12 to point out that men depend on women for their existence therefore men and women are of equal worth.

So then, the clear underlying principle is that there is an order to be observed: God – Christ – man – woman. And this is not some arbitrary thing. It has been this way since creation when the order was set by God.

“For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man.”

Verses 8 – 9

2. The Use Of Head-Coverings Is A Symbol Of Order

Having established the principle, Paul develops his argument by showing that the proper use of head-coverings is a visible sign that God’s ordained order is observed by the church.

“Every man praying or prophesying, having (literally) down from his head, shames his head.”

Verse 4

For a man to wear his toga down from the head (see above) in worship brings shame on Christ, his head¹. Having been created in God’s image, for Him to cover Himself would be to conceal the glory of God.

“For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God.”

Verse 7

That may be because in doing so he would be denying his true position by taking on the garb of a woman. It is interesting that what Paul prescribes here is a departure from the Jewish practice of men covering their heads in worship.

For a woman to pray or prophesy with her head uncovered, Paul says, brings shame upon her husband (verse 5) because

“...woman is the glory of man.”

Verse 7

Presenting herself as a woman of ill-repute would reflect on the reputation of her husband.

“But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered.”

Verses 5 – 6

But the focus of these verses is not the head-covering. It is what the head-covering represents. It is an outward symbol of a social order that God has ordained and that must be maintained in the church. For men to wear head-coverings or for women to go bareheaded in Corinth would have made a clear statement. It would have said, “We reject God’s order.”

¹ In verse 3 the word head is used metaphorically. In verses 3 to 7 it is used both literally — referring to the physical head — and metaphorically — in the same sense as in verse 3. It is not difficult to determine which way the word is being used each time. Common sense decides it.

What Is Not Clear?

1. How Can You Wear Authority?

What Paul means when he says, "For this reason the woman ought to have authority on her head" (the word symbol has been added by the translators) is far from clear. Suggestions have been made.

- Head-covering symbolises acceptance of authority. But the linguists tell us we have no other example of the word "authority" being used passively in the New Testament. It is always about having authority.
- A head-covering is a symbol of authority conferred. In other words the head-covering is a sign that a woman, who accepts her position in the social order, has been authorised to pray and prophesy. This meaning does not fit the context easily and it makes the covering represent two different things in the same passage. It also necessitates adding the word symbol which is not present in the original.
- In wearing a head-covering a woman is taking control or authority over how she is viewed by others: assuming a position of respect whilst recognising her subordination. This view is consistent with the way the wearing of a veil is viewed by eastern women even today. Without her veil a woman becomes an object of ridicule, despised by men; with her veil she is respected: she has dignity.

2. What Have Angels Got To Do With It?

Even more baffling is Paul's explanation of why a woman should have authority on her head: "because of the angels." None of the proposed explanations is without problems.

- Some take the "angels" to be ministers or servants of the churches, as in Revelation 1:20, but it is hard to see how this could fit the context.
- Another view says that Paul had in mind women imitating the angels who, in Isaiah 6:2, covered their faces with their wings in the presence of God.
- There is a range of views which take it that angels are present when God's people meet to worship Him and various reasons are given as to why the wearing of a head-covering should be important to them. Perhaps the simplest is to say that it is a demonstration to the angels that proper order is being maintained.

3. With A Hairdo Like That Who Needs A Hat?

The introduction of a reference to the length of a woman's hair in verses 14 and 15 adds a further complication to the whole passage.

Having concluded his argument for the wearing of a head-covering Paul appeals to common sense and says, now you judge for yourself what is right (verse 13), what does nature teach you: If a man has long hair it is a disgrace but if a woman has long hair:

"...it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering."

Verse 15

When He speaks of nature, presumably Paul is talking about what was considered natural in those days, for men and women grow hair at the same rate. In first century Corinth if a man had long hair it was a sign of effeminacy and weakness. A woman's long hair, on the other hand was a token of her femininity. But if a woman's long hair is a covering, does she need another one? Is long hair what Paul was been talking about all along? Some would argue strongly that it is and others that in these closing verses Paul is merely drawing an analogy and saying that women should follow the lead of nature and wear a head-covering.

What Does It All Mean?

Well, what should all this mean in practice?

The underlying principle is clear and is consistent with other passages which are even more clear in their meaning. There is a social order that must be seen to be observed by God's people. That order dates back to creation and has nothing to do with the culture of the day and to fail to observe it is to reject God's Word. Whatever we do when we meet we must do nothing that appears to set that principle aside.

Paul's argument is that the wearing of head-coverings by Christian women is a visible expression of the church's submission to God's order and in first century Corinth that would have been understood. Any other

practice would have been a declaration by the women of the church that they did not accept God's order, a strong signal to the whole city that Christian women have no regard for the honour of their husbands and something which would have laid them open to a charge of flaunting themselves like prostitutes.

The question you must answer is, whilst the underlying principle still stands does the practice of wearing a head-covering remain as a convention to be followed by Christian women today?

Here are some thoughts to bear in mind as you try to decide:

In our society a head-covering is seen as nothing more than a (rather out-dated) fashion accessory. To wear one carries no significance for modern people and even within the Christian community its significance has been lost to most women. These are not necessarily reasons to say the practice of wearing a head-covering is wrong but if it is to be followed its meaning must be recovered for the principle that underlies it is more important than the practice.

In Corinth the wearing of head-coverings sent a positive signal to the outside world, today it says "out-dated." Again this is not a reason not to do it. If God commands it you have to do it and live with the consequences but if God does not command it maybe it has to be rethought if we want to remove things that could come in the way of unbelievers hearing the gospel.

Some believe that to say Paul's requirement of a head-covering was determined by the culture of his day and is no longer binding is to question the authority of God's Word but there are other passages we have chosen to interpret in the light of circumstances that prevailed when they were written. For example, we were content to understand 1 Corinthians 7 in the light of prevailing circumstances in Corinth. Indeed we had to in order to avoid a conflict between it and other parts of God's Word. And how do you think the much clearer and repeated teaching of Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26 and 1 Peter 5:14 should be applied?

"Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss."

For some the most straight forward reading of the passage takes it at face value and says, yes the women should wear head-coverings. Perhaps if we were not aware of aspects of Corinthian culture which are not recorded in Scripture it would not have occurred to us to question this. As well as that, it is hard to step outside our own culture with its strong feminist leanings and look at the issue objectively. Were it not for the strong influence of feminism even among Christians would we be having this discussion?

If you do conclude that the wearing of a head-covering is not binding on Christian women today then you must ask what are the culturally appropriate ways in which we demonstrate that God's social order is maintained in our fellowship? It is doubly important that we do so for although first century Corinth with all its pagan immorality maintained it after a fashion, that social order has been rejected by today's world.