

The Headcovering in Worship

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Pompton Plains, NJ

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Introduction

At an informational meeting of our congregation, the question was asked whether the women's use of a headcovering in the worship service is Biblical or merely traditional. This study is an attempt to answer that question. Technical and linguistic material, though thoroughly considered, has been kept to a minimum in this publication so as to provide as simple and straightforward a presentation as possible.

First Corinthians is somewhat unique among Paul's epistles. At first glance, one might think the apostle chose subjects to write about almost at random. In fact, by divine inspiration the Apostle Paul wove together these varied issues into an important commentary on other, broader matters of concern to Christians both in his day and ours. The same applies to his comments on the use of a headcovering in worship, the subject we will be considering together.

An honest attempt has been made to take into account the considerable volume of material written on this subject. A bibliography has been appended for the benefit of those who would like to pursue further reading.

I am very thankful for my wife Ruth, who by the grace of God tries to exemplify the principles found in this passage and am greatly indebted to my son Peter and daughter Martha for their meticulous proofreading efforts.

To God be the glory for any help, dear reader, that you may gain from this work.

Pastor David J. Lipsy
Pompton Plains, NJ

Chapter One

First Corinthians – An Overview

If I were to ask you how you are feeling today, you might answer, “I’m feeling a bit ill.” If you then added the words, “This has been a rather discouraging day for me,” I would probably understand you to mean that at least one reason you are discouraged is your sickness, but that there might be other causes for your discouragement as well.

In trying to answer the question, “What is God teaching us in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16?” we should be aware of a similar overlap in Paul’s writing. Obviously, he is addressing the subject of the use of a headcovering in worship. But at the same time he is addressing matters of broader significance, ones that resurface throughout the epistle. Only as we begin to realize the overlapping nature of Paul’s approach do we better appreciate the richness of this Scripture passage.

The Big Picture

Why did the Holy Ghost inspire the apostle Paul to write his first letter to the Corinthians? What makes this epistle unique? Are there overarching themes that impact how we are to understand each part? These questions invite us to consider the overall context of 1 Corinthians 11:10-16.

First Corinthians is unique in that it resembles a conversation. Paul is answering questions the Corinthians had asked him.¹ He re-

¹ See 1 Cor. 7:1, for example.

sponds with concern to problems that had reportedly surfaced in the congregation (1 Cor. 1:11) and uses the opportunity to teach them certain doctrinal and practical truths relevant to their situation.²

From a “big picture” perspective, Paul primarily focuses on two sins that had begun to seriously affect the Corinthian congregation. The first of these sins was a growing spirit of individualism, driven in part by pride over spiritual gifts and attainments. The second somewhat-related sin was a gross misunderstanding and misapplication of Christian liberty.³ As we will see, he addresses these sins in a variety of ways. It is helpful to recognize these twin sin areas in order to better understand all that Paul is saying in the passage we are studying together.

A Topical Perspective

In addition to addressing these main sins, Paul provides the church with divine instruction on other specific issues including the Christian’s use of civil courts, the medicinal character of Christian discipline, and the relationship between Christian liberty and Christian charity. With God’s help, it is our responsibility to seek to know in what ways these issues speak to our present-day situation.⁴

The Currents

In addition to overarching themes and the various individual topics,

² Consider his discussion of wisdom, interwoven throughout chaps. 1-3.

³ Chap. 3 (pp. 37-42) of this work contains a more in-depth treatment of these two sins.

⁴ Here is a suggested summary of the subjects covered: divisions in the congregation, the distinction between true wisdom and the wisdom of the world, and the importance of Christians glorying in God alone (chaps. 1-4); the medicinal use of church discipline and whether Christians ought to use civil courts to settle differences among themselves (chaps. 5 – 6:8); fornication, marriage, and singleness under the umbrella-like theme of calling (chaps. 6:9 – 7); Christian liberty and its relationship to Christian charity as well as various benefits of self-denial (chaps. 8 – 10); headcoverings in worship and related issues of authority as well as instruction about the Lord’s Supper (chap. 11); spiritual gifts (chaps.12 – 14); and the resurrection (chap. 15).

one can also discover a third layer, a third stream of thought that flows beneath groups of topics. We will refer to these streams as “currents.”

As water flowing beneath the earth’s surface affects the growth of plants above, so these subtle, underlying currents affect the topics found along their course. These streams of thought vary in length from a few verses to several chapters. Identifying them can help us understand why topics were written in the order they were, how they relate to one another, and why they sometimes resurface in more than one section of the epistle.⁵

The Whole Picture

As we explore 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, let’s keep in mind all three perspectives we’ve just reviewed – the “big picture,” the individual topics themselves, and the underlying currents of thought. By doing so we will better understand what the Spirit is communicating to us in this epistle.

⁵ One such “current” is Paul’s teaching on Christian liberty, running from chap. 8 through chap. 10.

Chapter Two

1 Corinthians 11:1-16 – Verse by Verse

Verse 1

Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.

“Be ye an imitator of me to the degree that I am also of Christ” is literally what Paul commands here. This is an important principle. No Christian, however exemplary he might be, is worthy of our imitation any more than he himself imitates Christ.

Consider this command in light of what the apostle had just written in 1 Cor. 10:31-33. Do all to the glory of God. Offend no one unnecessarily. Forego your own profit so that others might profit and be saved. Now in 1 Cor. 11:1 Paul takes us a step higher. Follow me, imitate me, inasmuch as I imitate Christ. Who could ever measure the self-denial our Lord exercised for the profit of lost sinners? What a powerful motivation to obedience this is, both with regard to what Paul had just written and that which he is about to write!

Verse 2

Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.

The apostle always seems to find reasons for thankfulness. He addresses many problems and sins in the Corinthian congregation, yet he does not fail to mention that which is worthy of praise. We can learn from this. What *was* praiseworthy among the Christians at Corinth?

The Corinthians remembered Paul in all things. Perhaps he was often in their prayers. Maybe they frequently referred to his instruction and example in their conversations. Paul also commends them for holding fast the ordinances he entrusted to their care. The Corinthians may have been faulty in many aspects of the Christian life, but the apostle is saying that most of what he had taught them was carefully kept.

“Ordinances” has been the object of some discussion. It is sometimes translated “tradition.”⁶ Does Paul mean the issue he is just beginning to write about is merely a tradition, something that applies only to the church of his day or in his cultural setting? We can’t really make that conclusion based on his use of this word. Let’s see why not.

The word translated as “ordinances” is used several times in the New Testament in a negative sense and refers to non-binding, unscriptural traditions. Paul certainly wouldn’t have that meaning in view in reference to his own teaching.⁷ Instead, it is significant to note that each time Paul uses the word in a positive sense, it refers to an authoritative command of God to His church.⁸ It is in this sense Paul uses the word here.

Interestingly, the verb translated “delivered” is based on the same root. In each of Paul’s nineteen positive uses of this verb, he associates it with transmitting doctrine.⁹ It’s the same verb, for example, that he uses in verse 23 when referring to his “delivering” the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper to the Corinthians.

Based on these findings, we can safely conclude that Paul isn’t de-

⁶ One such example is Matt. 15:2-3.

⁷ Two examples are Mark 7:13 and Gal. 1:14.

⁸ Consider 2 Thess. 2:15 and 3:6. The commentator Thiselton points out that in early Christian literature this word soon came to mean “an authoritative tradition of Christian teaching,” citing as examples passages from the early church fathers Polycarp, Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen.

⁹ See, for example, Rom. 6:17, 1 Cor. 11:23 (twice), and 1 Cor. 15:3, as well as Peter’s identical use of the word in 2 Pet. 2:21. The negative use of the word has to do with committing someone to prison or to death.

scribing the instruction he's about to give as a mere tradition. Instead he clearly desires that the reader give the same attention to this new instruction as he does to the Lord's Supper, Jesus' resurrection, and other important doctrines of Christianity already taught. We say "new" instruction, because a careful comparison of verses 2, 3, 17, 22, and 23 shows us that the apostle had not previously taught the Corinthians what he is now about to write.¹⁰

Verse 3

But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.

The word "but" indicates a change of subject or direction. The expression "I would have you know" tells us Paul is introducing new material.¹¹

As he does elsewhere in his writings, Paul begins this new subject by laying its doctrinal foundation. He introduces three layers of God's ordained hierarchy of authority. The first one he mentions is Christ's headship over man.

In Matthew 28:18 Christ declares, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." The word translated "power" also means authority or jurisdiction.¹² Christ's authority extends over all men col-

¹⁰ In v. 2 Paul says the Corinthians had done well in keeping what he had taught them. Vv. 17, 22, and 23 indicate Paul's disappointment with at least one failure. Contrast this with the fact that no mention of disobedience is made in the whole passage we're considering. It is evident that vv. 2-16 was new material for them.

¹¹ That this is new material is important to keep in mind, since a few commentators suggest that Paul's "tone" in this passage is not as urgent as that used later when writing about the Lord's Supper. They are implying, of course, that the headcovering issue must not have been as important to Paul. This conclusion is incorrect. We would not expect Paul to use the same urgency when teaching something for the first time as he would when admonishing a congregation for disobedience.

¹² Similar declarations of Christ's preeminence over all things include: 1 Cor. 15:24-25, 2 Cor. 5:10, Col. 2:10, and Eph. 1:20-22. This same word is used in v. 10 of the chapter we are considering.

lectively and over each man individually, even if they do not consciously acknowledge Him as Lord. Though it has pleased God to assign certain spheres of authority to men, they are reminded here that all are answerable to Jesus Christ, whose authority supersedes theirs.¹³

Paul purposely begins with man's subservience to God, showing that all mankind (men and women alike) are subject to a higher authority. In his next phrase, Paul mentions one of the authority relationships God was pleased to establish here on earth: "...and the head of the woman is the man."¹⁴

With these words, Paul states a fundamental Scriptural principle: it is ordinarily God's will to assign men a position of authority with respect to women. In verse 9 Paul returns to this principle by referring to the creation account: "Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man." What relevance does this principle have to our passage?

As suggested in chapter 1, one of the main sin problems in the church at Corinth was the abuse of Christian liberty. Combined with an unhealthy regard for spiritual giftedness,¹⁵ this resulted in perhaps a sizeable number of the brethren beginning to think and act more as individuals than as interrelated members of the body of Christ. In our passage, as well as in 1 Cor. 14:34-35, Paul identifies one of the ways this sin was expressed. The Corinthian women began to exceed the bounds of propriety by assuming to themselves a status and function in the church ordinarily assigned by God to

¹³ Though Head over all things, Jesus Christ is, in a tender and favorable way, the blessed Head of His church and of every believer in particular. He is explicitly called such in Scripture (Eph. 1:22, 4:15, 5:23, and Col. 2:19). He leads, guides, is our wisdom and our King. The very name "Christ" reminds us that He was and still is anointed and appointed of the Father to be Lord over us.

¹⁴ Consider the many layers of authority under which most of us live: civil authorities on the national, regional, and local levels; ecclesiastical authorities; parents, teachers, employers, etc.

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this, see chap. 3 of this study, pp. 37-42.

men.

It could be that the Corinthian women had misunderstood or misapplied Paul's teaching on equality. Their thinking might have proceeded along these lines: Eve's subjection to Adam was part of the curse that resulted from the Fall (Gen. 3:16). Believers are redeemed from the curse by Christ (Gal. 3:13). Therefore women are freed from this subjection, at least in the community of believers.¹⁶ But is this conclusion Biblical? Is a woman's subjection to male authority figures merely a post-fall phenomena erased by salvation? Paul begins to address this issue by stating, "...and the head of Christ is God."

Jesus Christ, God's own Son, willingly became the Servant of Jehovah in order to accomplish our salvation.¹⁷ In some of the most remarkable verses in all of Scripture, we are told that He, as a servant, learned obedience and exercised submission to God.¹⁸ Jesus even submitted to unjust human authority figures so that believers could be justified in Him.¹⁹ Paul's train of thought is, "If all men are under the authority of Christ, and if our Savior as Servant did not think it beneath Him to submit to God's authority and even that of unjust men, should women consider their calling to submission somehow demeaning or incompatible with their redemption?" The order of Paul's statements is significant. All men are under Christ's authority. Christ took upon Himself the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7). Thus, women also should continue in their place within God's authority structure.

¹⁶ Some feminist theologians even today refer to Gal. 3:28 as a "proof" that traditional male-female distinctions, especially with respect to authority, should be reconsidered.

¹⁷ Ps. 40:7-8; John 4:34, 5:30; Isa. 42:1, 52:13; Heb. 10:7-10.

¹⁸ Compare, for example, Heb. 5:6-9 and Matt. 26:42.

¹⁹ In addition to His heavenly Father, our dear Savior also submitted Himself to other, fallible authorities such as His parents (Luke 2:51), the high priest (John 18:13ff.), Herod (Luke 23:7), and even the unjust Pilate (Matt. 27:2ff., John 19:6).

Some point out that in verse 3 Paul uses the two Greek words for man and woman that are sometimes translated “husband” and “wife.”²⁰ Therefore, they suggest, Paul is only speaking about the headship of a husband with respect to his wife. There are a number of instances in the New Testament, however, where these words clearly refer to unmarried persons.²¹ As we proceed, it will become evident that Paul intended to include married and unmarried women in his instruction.²²

Paul is not saying that every man has a particular authority over all women. If that were true, a husband’s authority in his home could be overruled by virtually any other male. Paul is simply saying that as a general principle God ordains men to leadership roles and women to subordinate roles.²³ It is likely that Paul purposely used these two Greek words precisely because they have flexibility of meaning, applying both to the married and to the unmarried.

There have been some writers, especially in the last fifty years or so, who suggest that Paul’s use of the word “head” in these verses refers to “source” rather than “authority.” The idea is that man comes from God, woman from man, and Christ from God. This interpretation, however, is contrary to an almost universal

²⁰ These same two words are used throughout vv. 3-15.

²¹ Consider Luke 1:42, Luke 4:26, John 1:30 (Jesus), John 4:18, and 1 Cor. 7:1. Rom. 7:2 is especially interesting in that Paul qualifies this Greek word with “which hath an husband,” clearly showing that in his mind this word is not always equated with “wife.”

²² Even in this verse itself, when Paul uses this word in the statement “the head of every *man* is Christ,” he is certainly not suggesting that our Lord is only the head of husbands. In v. 12 he states that all men (not just husbands,) are brought into this world by means of the woman in childbirth (see also chap. 6 of this work, especially pp. 65-66).

²³ Some instances of male exercise of leadership roles other than that of a husband are fathers over their families (1 Tim. 3:4-5), elders over their congregation (1 Tim. 5:17), and kings over their subjects (1 Tim. 2:2).

testimony of Biblical and extra-Biblical sources.²⁴ Without question, Paul is writing about a structure of authority divinely and sovereignly decreed.²⁵

Verse 4

Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoreth his head.

The word “every” reminds us that Paul’s instruction in this verse is to be applied to all men praying or prophesying within the setting suggested by the overall passage.²⁶

Four questions immediately face us. What does “prophesying” mean? What does “having his head covered” mean? In what way is a man’s head dishonored when he prays or prophesies having his head uncovered? Is the latter “head” in this verse to be taken literally or figuratively?

Briefly defined, Biblical prophecy was a spiritual gift by means of which God communicated His will through one individual to others. In other words, to prophesy is to proclaim a divine revelation, to prophetically reveal what was hidden, or to foretell the future.²⁷

When Paul sent his first epistle to Corinth, little of the New Testament had been written. It is uncertain how much familiarity the congregation might have had with the Old Testament. It should

²⁴ Wayne Grudem claims that among the 2,336 examples of “head” in non-Biblical Greek literature, there are perhaps two examples of the word being used to mean “source,” and those two are doubtful. Col. 1:18, 2:19, and Eph. 4:15 are sometimes cited in favor of the meaning “source,” but these passages are far from conclusive. No citation from the rest of Paul’s writings or from the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament supports the meaning “source.” For a somewhat scholarly and detailed discussion of the use of the word, consider Thiselton, pp. 812-823 or Fitzmyer, pp. 503-511.

²⁵ Richard Bacon, commenting on this verse, points out that Paul taught virtually the same thing in similar terms in Eph. 5:23-25.

²⁶ Based on a number of factors, this passage is dealing with, at the very least, a worship service context and possibly more than that. See chap. 4 of this work, pp. 42-53 for a further discussion of this.

²⁷ See BGAD 6:828ff., Thayer pp. 552-3, and Louw & Nida 1:440.

not surprise us therefore that God blessed and guided the early New Testament church, including this congregation, through prophetic revelation.²⁸

By contrast, we find decreasing mention of the gift of prophesy in the later New Testament books compared with those written earlier. In the last book of the New Testament, we find a stark warning against any addition to or deletion from the completed Scriptures (Rev. 22:19). The need for ongoing revelation ceased, and with it, the prophetic gift.²⁹ This is why in our day we do not recognize people who claim to have the prophetic gift or office or who claim to receive ongoing revelations from God.³⁰

What does Paul mean by the words “having his head covered”? The Greek literally means “having down from the head.” This expression is unique to this verse in the New Testament. Why does Paul use such unique wording? As in other places, the apostle may be using a single phrase to express more than one thought at a time. Let’s see how.

Recall Paul’s teaching about headship and authority in the previous verse. He now adds to that by informing us that man’s covering his head while engaged in certain spiritual activities dishonors him. When a man is praying or prophesying, he is engaged in the public exercise of spiritual gifts.³¹ To speak on behalf of the people to God, or for God to the people, is obviously a leadership function.³² For a man to cover his head while thus engaged, Paul contends,

²⁸ Almost 700 occurrences of the words “prophet,” “prophesy,” “prophesying” or some other derivation of these words can be found in the New Testament.

²⁹ O. P. Robertson gives an interesting and compelling history of the cessation of revelation as chronicled in the New Testament (Robertson, pp. 60-78).

³⁰ For a more in-depth discussion of prophesy, see chap. 4 of this work, especially pp. 43-47.

³¹ The public nature of the prophetic gift is also discussed in chap. 4 of this work, especially pp. 46-47.

³² Men prophesying in their own name or authority is reprehensible in God’s sight (Jer. 23:16, 21, 26; Ezek. 13:2, 17).

would bring dishonor to his head.³³ Paul defers the explanation of why this covering dishonors the man until verse 7. At present, he simply states that it is so.

In addition to referring to a symbolic headcovering in verse 4, Paul's unique wording might also be a subtle reference to verse 14 where he speaks against men's having long hair. In other words, "having down from the head" allows him to simultaneously comment about the material headcovering and his prohibition against a man's having long hair.³⁴

It is important not to overlook the conjunction "or" that connects praying and prophesying. Several authors appropriately point out the close connection we find in Scripture between these two activities. But the inspired inclusion of this word in verses 4 and 5 is critical. Even though the gift of prophesy no longer exists in the New Testament church today, public prayer does; therefore the apostle's instructions are still applicable.³⁵

³³ V. 3 clearly directs us to associate the covered head with submission to authority. V. 7 hints at the same. The verb translated here as "dishonoreth" is the same verb used in v. 5. The noun form of this word is translated as "shame" in v. 6. William Webster says this word gives us the "sense of disgrace; the feeling of shame...which attends the performance of a dishonorable deed and the feeling which deters a man from bad conduct."

³⁴ The early church father Chrysostom entertains this possibility. At least five modern commentators limit Paul's "down from the head" expression to mean *only* a prohibition against long hair in men (Thiselton, p. 824). Fee, however, notes that this would be an usual way for Paul to say something that he states with greater clarity in v. 14. He also cites precedent, though slight, in both the Septuagint and secular literature, supporting a tie between this expression and a man placing a material headcovering upon his head (pp. 506-507).

³⁵ Many men still today almost instinctively remove their hats when public prayer is offered. The conjunction "or" is important in answering the objections of writers like North who argue that the disappearance of the prophetic gift should have spelled the end of the "prophetic head covering." Note, however, that in v. 13, prayer alone is mentioned. Waltke writes, "In the historical process of administering His church, however, God has been pleased with the completion of the canon of Scripture to withdraw the gift of prophecy. In the practice of the churches today, the apostolic teaching has relevance directly only to prayer."

From the careful use of double meaning in other places, it appears that Paul uses the word “head” in verse 4 both literally, referring to man’s physical head, as well as figuratively, referring to Christ.³⁶

Verse 5

But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.

The adjective “every” reminds us of the universal application of Paul’s instruction here.³⁷ This verse presents a few challenges.

Does Paul here approve a woman’s praying or prophesying in public, while in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 he expressly prohibits it? A considerable amount of commentary has been generated by this question. Because of the complexities involved, the answer has been given separate treatment in chapter 4, pages 43-53.

The word translated “uncovered” is the negative adjectival form of a verb that means “to cover” or “to veil.” The noun form of the word means “headcovering, hood, or veil.”³⁸ This form is used in 2 Corinthians 3:13-16, where Paul writes about the Old Testament story of Moses veiling his face after coming down from Mt. Sinai (Exodus 34:29ff.).

Some commentators suggest that Paul is not referring to a material covering or veil but to men’s and women’s hair.³⁹ They point to the latter half of verse 15, which reads, “...for her hair is given her for a covering,” suggesting that by this statement Paul clearly shows what sort of covering he had in mind in the preceding verses. We

³⁶ More about this is found in n. 41 and on p. 58 of this work.

³⁷ Again, the context suggests the woman praying or prophesying in a public setting, as discussed in chap. 4 of this work, especially pp. 46-47.

³⁸ More detailed and technical information on these words can be found in TDNT III 556-563; NIDNTT II 212-214; Liddell & Scott, p. 47; Thayer, p. 21; and BDAG, p. 29.

³⁹ This is the view of Murphy-O’Connor, Martin, Hurley, Padgett, and Horsley, as cited by Thiselton (p. 824).

will assess this argument when considering verse 15.

The apostle states that the woman dishonors her head when she prays or prophesies with her head uncovered.⁴⁰ In this verse Paul does not specifically explain what the connection is between the uncovered head and the dishonor this brings upon the woman, but simply states it as fact just as he did of the man in verse 4.⁴¹

Paul is certainly emphatic about the shameful nature of the woman's head thus uncovered, writing, "...for that is even all one as if she were shaven." The word translated "for" explains and expands upon what he just said in the beginning of the verse.⁴² If the one is done, it is all the same as if the other were also. The starkness of this expression must have immediately caught the attention of the Corinthian readers. It leads us to believe that the women at Corinth were the primary focus of Paul's instruction in this passage.

Though many commentators attempt to do so, it seems irrelevant to try to analyze the cultural setting at Corinth with regard to women's hair since Paul explicitly states in verse 15 that even "nature itself" teaches that long hair brings glory to the woman.⁴³ From the divine perspective, it is not a matter of culture or tradition, but one taught by nature itself. If the woman's long hair is her glory, it naturally follows that a shaven head would be a

⁴⁰ "Dishonor" here is the same word as in v. 4.

⁴¹ As was mentioned in comments on the previous verse, it appears that Paul, in saying "dishonoreth her head," is referring both to her physical head as well as to the male authority figure(s) in her life. This kind of dual reference is also discussed on p. 58 of this work.

⁴² According to Robertson, this conjunction is used to introduce explanations, reasons, conclusions, or inferences (Grammar, pp. 1190-91).

⁴³ Thiselton devotes a number of pages to the differing findings of writers regarding what cultural styles prevailed at that time (pp. 828ff.).

considerable shame to her.⁴⁴

To Paul, the practice of the Corinthian women worshipping with uncovered heads was but another symptom of larger problems at Corinth – a tendency toward pride and a misunderstanding of Christian liberty. Seeing how some Corinthians showed disrespect to Paul, why should it surprise anyone that the women did so toward male authorities in their own congregation?⁴⁵ Instead of considering this practice an appropriate expression of Christian liberty, Paul calls it utterly shameful. Christian liberty does not operate independently of others in the church. Nor does it give one license to neglect other principles in God’s Word.

Verse 6

For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.

The word translated “for” tells us that this verse is an explanation of the one before. Paul’s reasoning prepares the reader for the simple command at the end of the verse.

“Let her also be shorn” is a command which in the Greek means “let her shear her own hair.” If she will be so bold as to do the one thing, then let her do the other. The second “if” clause doesn’t introduce doubt. The meaning is, “If it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven (and it is), let her be covered.” The words “shorn” and “shaven” are different by degree. The first word is typically used of sheep shearing. The second means to shave off all or nearly

⁴⁴ Some writers, like Godet, point to the fact that the Greek slave and the Jewish adulteress would have their heads shaved as a token of dishonor. Deut. 21:12 speaks about the shaving of the hair of a female captive – this action reflecting subjection, mourning, or both. Fee and others suggest that Paul is here making reference to “mannish hair,” blurring the male-female distinctions. Lenski and Fee dismiss any association of shaven hair with prostitution, a theory entertained by commentators a generation ago but which lacks historical support.

⁴⁵ Hints of their disrespect toward Paul include 1 Cor. 4:2, 18; 2 Cor. 10:10; and 2 Cor. 12:15.

all the hair.⁴⁶ Paul is saying that since it is indeed shameful for a woman to cut or shave her hair, let her therefore be covered.⁴⁷

Verse 7

For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.

Verse 7 begins with another “for,” connecting it with verses 4 and 5. The apostle is returning to the principles underlying the practice he commands. In verse 3, the apostle wrote about God’s order of authority. Here, he brings forth a second consideration, the image of God in man.

All creation reveals something of God to man (Rom. 1:19-20). God has preeminently revealed Himself in and through His Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:3, Col. 2:9). Yet God also created man to bear His image (Gen. 1:26-27). That sinless image in man was lost through the Fall, though remnants of it may still be seen (Gen. 5:3).⁴⁸ God’s blessed image is restored in man through God’s re-creative work, called in Scripture the “new birth” and “regeneration.”⁴⁹ This image will be perfected in glory (1 Cor. 15:49). Man, as created in God’s image, brings glory to God. The image of God in man must therefore not be veiled or covered, especially when he is exercising spiritual gifts in a leadership role.

But is not the Godly woman recreated in God’s image too? Why then must she be veiled? This question brings us to the heart of the entire passage. Paul writes, “...he [the man] is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.”

The new birth, salvation through Christ, does indeed renew God’s

⁴⁶ Thiselton cites an author who quotes a statement ascribed to Emperor Tiberius that illustrates the shade of difference between the two words: “I want my sheep to be sheared, not to be shaved” (p. 833).

⁴⁷ Again, the verb “let her be covered” is a command.

⁴⁸ See also the Belgic Confession of Faith, Art. 14 and the Canons of Dort, Head 3/4, Arts. 1-4.

⁴⁹ 2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; John 1:13, 3:3; Titus 3:5.

image in men and women alike. Godly knowledge, righteousness, and holiness are gifts both enjoy. Was it their appreciation of this that prompted the Corinthian women to appear in worship as the men, without a covering? Perhaps. But the apostle now draws attention to one aspect of God's image that was not given equally to both genders – that of authority.

A careful reading of Genesis 1:27-28 shows that God gave both Adam and Eve dominion over all living creatures. However, when it came to their relationship with one another, God made a distinction of authority – even before the Fall. Paul addresses this in the next two verses.⁵⁰

Paul concludes verse 7 in a surprising way. Just as men are subordinated to Christ and yet are the image and glory of God, so women are subordinated to men and yet are their glory.⁵¹ What does it mean for a woman to be man's glory?

A believing woman, cheerfully accepting and contentedly living within her God-assigned sphere of authority, is an ornament – a glory – to male authorities in her life. A daughter who respects and obeys her father's authority is her father's glory.⁵² A wife who respects and obeys her husband is her husband's glory.⁵³ As mentioned in verse 3, Christ glorified His Father by His submission and obedience to Him (John 17:4). In like manner, both men and women, by cheerful subjection to those in authority over them, not only give proper honor to these authorities, but more importantly,

⁵⁰ A more detailed discussion of how the theme of authority interacts with this passage can be found in chap. 6 of this work, pp. 65-68.

⁵¹ Regarding man's being the glory of God, Paul refers in 2 Cor. 8:23 to his "partner and fellowhelper" and "brethren...the messengers of the churches" together as "the glory of Christ."

⁵² Lev. 21:9 is a stark illustration of how a daughter's dishonor is accounted her father's dishonor.

⁵³ This truth is somewhat reflected by Prov. 12:4, "A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband." 1 Pet. 3:1-6 shows that a woman's godly contentment beautifies and adorns *her*. Examples of the contrary are the "contentious" woman (Prov. 21:19, 27:15) and the "brawling" woman (Prov. 25:24).

glorify God.⁵⁴

Let us remember that Paul is not writing about inequality, but rather distinction of calling. Men are not better than women, even as the Father is not better than Christ. As the Father's Servant, Jesus promoted His Father's glory (John 4:34). In a variety of relationships, we are called to reflect His example.⁵⁵ Paul will address the question of equality more particularly in verses 11-12.

Verse 8

For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man.

In this verse and the next, the apostle introduces reasons why he makes the distinction he does between men and women. In verse 8 Paul points to the woman's origin, while in verse 9 he refers to her God-ordained role.

At first glance it might seem that verses 8 and 9 add little to Paul's argument. But here the apostle is teaching that the relationship between men and women with respect to authority is based on Creation and is not just a result of the Fall. The subjection of women to men is not something salvation erases, since its origin is not rooted solely in the curse that followed the Fall.⁵⁶

Verse 8 speaks specifically about the woman's origin. Man was formed by God from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). Eve was formed from a rib taken from Adam (Gen. 2:22).⁵⁷ The origin of

⁵⁴ This concept is illustrated in a number of places in Scripture, such as Eph. 6:5, Col. 2:22, 1 Tim. 6:1, and Titus 2:9-10. Schreiner, as quoted in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, contends that "glory" could be taken to mean the woman honors the man. He points to the way "glory" is juxtaposed with "dishonor" in vv. 14-15 (p. 133).

⁵⁵ Eph. 6:1,5; Col. 3:33; Titus 2:5,9; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 3:1.

⁵⁶ For more on this subject of authority, see chap. 6 of this work, pp. 65-68.

⁵⁷ See Botterweck and Ringgren 2:166ff. for more about the wording in the Hebrew.

the woman is the man.⁵⁸ Adam’s naming of the animals, his naming of Eve, and God’s dealing with Adam as covenant head are all indications that God ordained Adam to be an authority figure for Eve.⁵⁹

Verse 9

Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.

Verse 9 also includes the same word “for” that we’ve seen in verses 5 through 8. Here in the English it is omitted, most likely for grammatical reasons.⁶⁰ Verse 9 continues the explanation begun in verse 8. Not only was the woman formed from man, but she was also formed for him, that is, to assist him. “And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.”⁶¹

Throughout Scripture, this subordination of women to men is rarely spoken of in negative terms. Instead, as with other authority relationships described in Scripture, it is portrayed more in terms of duty, calling, and function.⁶² Only in recent times has this Biblical

⁵⁸ In 1 Tim. 2:12-14, Paul again mentions man’s being created first as the main reason behind the authority relationship between men and women. “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve.” Paul adds to this the observation that Eve was first in transgression, being deceived.

⁵⁹ Gen. 2:16, 17, 23, 25; 3:20; Rom. 5:12-19. In his 1996 Banner Conference addresses, Professor Futato points out that in the ancient Near East, naming is an exercise of authority over another.

⁶⁰ Omitting the “for” makes for a less awkward-sounding English sentence. Besides, the “for” in v. 8 is linked to v. 9 by the word “neither.”

⁶¹ Futato points out that the word translated “helper” does not communicate the status of the helper, but only his role or function. It is used of one who subordinates himself for the other’s good, regardless of whether he is equal to or even superior in status to the one helped (see 1 Chron. 12:16-22).

⁶² Consider the way Scripture describes the relationship of servant to master in Eph. 6:5, Col. 3:22, 1 Tim. 6:1, Titus 2:9, 1 Pet. 2:18; of wife to husband in Eph. 5:22,24, Col. 3:18, 1 Pet. 3:1; of children to parents in Eph. 6:1, Col. 3:20, 1 Tim. 5:4; and of citizen to civil authority in Rom. 13:1-7.

principle been challenged on a large scale.

In this entire passage, neither the Fall nor the curse is mentioned once. The only change introduced by the Fall and subsequent curse was that women would be subject to *fallen* men (Gen. 3:16). God's plan concerning their relationship did not change. How that relationship functions, however, is another story.⁶³

Freedom from the bondage of sin through faith in Christ does not change the authority hierarchy established by God before the Fall. Christ's blood indeed washes away original and actual sin, but it does not essentially change the role we were created to fulfill. Perhaps the Christians at Corinth failed to grasp this properly.

Verse 10

For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.

This is the most difficult verse in the passage to explain. Since the earliest centuries, the New Testament church has tried to do so – with varying success.

The literal translation of the first part is “Because of this the woman ought...” Some have suggested “this” refers to the verse that follows. But the natural flow of Paul's argument suggests this verse to be a conclusion drawn from the verses 8 and 9.

What does “have power on her head because of the angels” mean? In the New Testament, the word translated “power” typically means either power or authority.⁶⁴ Back in chapter 8 verse 9, the same words is translated “liberty.” “But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.”

Several commentators say Paul is using “power” as a kind of me-

⁶³ Prov. 31:10-31, 1 Cor. 7:34, 1 Tim. 5:14, Titus 2:4-5.

⁶⁴ Matt. 21:23-24 and Luke 4:36 are examples of it being used to mean “authority.” Rev. 9:3 suggests the meaning “power.” Matt. 28:18 could be either, or perhaps both. In a few rare instances, such as 1 Cor. 9:12 and Rev. 22:14, the word means “rights.”

tonymy, substituting the word “power” for the symbol of it, the headcovering.⁶⁵ But the headcovering is a symbol of submission, not power. If these commentators are correct, we would expect Paul to write, “The woman ought to have *subjection* on her head.”

Others suggest that Paul is saying women have the authority to pray and prophesy but just need to add the appropriate covering. Verses 11 and 12, they say, support and explain their having this authority. It is hard to believe, however, that after taking pains to explain the woman’s subordinate role, Paul would then say that she does have authority to lead men in worship as long as she wears something that symbolizes the opposite of that authority. This runs contrary to the apostle’s entire train of thought up to this point.

The fact is, verses 11 and 12 are added as a caution against men’s arrogant or abusive misuse of the instruction already given. The Greek word that begins verse 11 indicates a restriction or clarification of verse 10, not an explanation supporting it.

It is much more consistent to interpret verse 10 to mean, “Because of the woman’s subordinate role, she should rightly exercise liberty over her head,” that is, by covering it. The preposition translated “on” further supports this interpretation. When used with the word “power,” it sometimes means have power “over” something.⁶⁶ It also can mean to “have power on” (as in “on her head”). When the meanings are taken together, the idea is, “The woman should exercise her liberty over her own head” (by having something on it). She should do so, writes Paul, because of the angels.

These words, “because of the angels,” have been a matter of much speculation. Yet Paul’s reference to angels in this verse is not something unusual for him. He mentions them three other times in this

⁶⁵ Thiselton points to several early church fathers who held this view. Meyer, Bordwine, and others even suggest that this is the majority position.

⁶⁶ As in Rev. 2:26, 11:6, 14:18, and 16:9.

epistle.⁶⁷ In 1 Timothy 5:21, he calls upon angels to be witnesses of how ministers perform their duties. In Hebrews 1:14, angels are described as “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation.” In the verse we are considering, Paul appears to be saying that angels are concerned that proper decorum be maintained in God’s church. In other words, the proper exercise of Christian liberty, balanced by a due regard for authority, is a matter of personal importance to angels. Paul is adding emphasis to the fact that our actions affect others around us for good or for ill.⁶⁸

Verse 11

Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.

The word “nevertheless” indicates that verse 11 is a qualification as opposed to an explanation of the previous verse. Paul does not want his teaching about a woman’s submission to be misunderstood or misused by men.

Verse 11 teaches us that although their roles may differ with respect to authority, men and women are dependent upon one another. “In the Lord” points to our mutual accountability to God.

The Lord purposely designed men and women to be different from each other. Eve was created not to duplicate, but to complement Adam. Married couples often experience that what one partner lacks, the other supplies. But this verse is not limited to marriage. The unique design, characteristics, and gifts of each gender yield

⁶⁷ In 1 Cor. 4:9, he mentions that angels behold what happens to God’s servants in this world. In 6:3, he reminds the Corinthians that they will one day judge angels (devils). In 13:1, Paul makes reference to the speech of angels.

⁶⁸ The angels, though in some ways superior to men, are nevertheless their servants (cf. Heb. 1:14 with Heb. 2:7,9). Willing subordination to authority is what distinguishes angels from devils. More about angels and their relationship to the church can be found on p. 48 of this study.

mutual benefit in a host of ways.⁶⁹ Paul's instruction here is no different from his comparison of God's church to a human body, in which each member occupies his unique place and performs his unique function.⁷⁰ Edification – not competition – should be the result.

Verse 12

For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.

Here is one obvious reason man remains dependent upon the woman. Ever since Eve was formed from Adam's rib, men have been begotten by means of women. Men could not so much as exist, never mind exercise authority, without women.

At the end of the verse, Paul elevates our minds to a higher plain. All things – the ways, the means, and our respective roles – are of God. He is the ultimate source of all life, all authority, all things. How dare we, mere creatures, quibble with God's grand design and purposes for us?

So far in this chapter, Paul has written about God's order of authority (v. 3), a practice that honors and symbolizes that order (vv. 4-5a), a caution leveled against the disregard of this practice (vv. 5b-6), an explanation of the distinction between the genders with respect to authority (v. 7), two verses appealing to creation in support of verse 7 (vv. 8-9), a uniquely-worded summary statement (v. 10), and two cautions against either misunderstanding or abusing his teaching about authority (vv. 11-12). In the remaining verses, the apostle concludes with three different ways of evaluating the instruction just given.

⁶⁹ The modern feminist movement tries to break down so-called "gender stereotypes." Yet these traditional associations do not so much reflect culture as they do God's creative design. Men and women are simply better suited for different callings.

⁷⁰ See, for example, 1 Cor. 4:12ff., 12:12-27, and Eph. 4:16.

Verse 13

Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?

In this verse, Paul returns to the issue of the headcovering. His doing so clearly shows that commentators are mistaken when they claim that authority is the only subject of importance in this passage. Clearly, the headcovering is important, too.

The apostle asks a pointed question. He is not simply asking the Corinthians what they think. Instead, he expects them to render a judgment on this issue in light of the instruction he just gave them. His question is rhetorical. In other words, Paul believes the answer should be obvious.

Literally, the first part of the verse reads, “Judge ye in your own selves.” In other words, “What does your conscience say?”⁷¹ He asks them to take a personal stand on the issue. Do you agree now nor not?

Notice that Paul only mentions prayer in this verse, omitting any reference to prophesying. Putting the word “or” between praying and prophesying in verses 4 and 5 was intentional. Long after the gift of prophesy would cease in the church, prayer would continue.⁷²

Because prophesy is audible, most commentators simply assume Paul is referring to audible prayer in this passage. In chapter fourteen, however, the apostle forbids women any audible expression of spiritual gifts in public worship. It is very possible, then, that he is here questioning the propriety of women having uncovered

⁷¹ This question is similar to the one he asks in 1 Cor. 10:15: “I speak as unto wise men; judge ye what I say.”

⁷² See n. 35 of this study. Paul’s teaching on the headcovering is still applicable to the church today, partly because prayer remains an active part of our worship.

heads even while praying silently in a public setting.⁷³

The expression “unto God” emphasizes the solemnity of prayer. In prophecy, a person speaks to the people on God’s behalf. In prayer, we address God, typically in our own words. “Unto God” serves as a reminder that prayer ought to be attended with the utmost reverence and propriety. By mentioning God here, Paul reminds us that not only angels and fellow humans are present when we pray, but God as well. It appears that this reminder serves to emphasize the shamefulness of women praying *to* God while slighting the honored role of service given them *by* God.

Is it lovely or becoming, Paul asks, that a woman with uncovered head pray to God? Inserting some English equivalents for the Greek word translated “comely” one could translate Paul’s question thus: “Is it clearly appropriate or is it obviously becoming for a woman to do this? Does it shine forth with propriety?”⁷⁴ How would we answer that question, now that we too have the benefit of the apostle’s instruction?

Verse 14

Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?

It would seem that what Paul has already written should be sufficiently convincing, yet here he adds additional support, appealing to what he calls “nature.”

Some say that Paul’s mention of “nature” means he was referring to what was natural for the Corinthians at that time and in their cul-

⁷³ To put it another way, even though women do not pray aloud in public worship (in obedience to 1 Cor. 14:34-35), Paul would have them cover their heads even when they pray silently under the leadership of a man praying aloud. Many in the Reformed tradition have maintained this practice.

⁷⁴ This word is used to describe Christ in Heb. 7:26: “For such an high priest became us...” He is just the kind of High Priest we need. In 1 Tim. 2:10, Paul writes that good works are becoming for women professing godliness. See also Matt. 3:15, Eph. 5:3, Titus 2:1, and Heb. 2:10.

ture. Their point, of course, is that Paul's instruction might not apply to *our* time and culture. After all, they say, historical data and the artistic representations of ancient men wearing long hair support the idea that Paul's teaching was culturally specific.

First, it is important to first determine what Paul meant by "nature."⁷⁵ The word is used (in various forms) sixteen times in the New Testament. In each example except one, Paul uses the word in reference to an unchangeable, created reality.⁷⁶ It may help to consider a few examples.

In Romans 1:26, Paul ties the expression "vile affections" to women who changed "the natural use into that which is against nature." "Natural" and "nature" obviously refer to the way women were created to live, while the "unnatural" practice is contrary to Creation. In Romans 2:14-15, Paul says Gentiles do "by nature the things contained in the law," adding that "the work of the law [is] written in their hearts." He is asserting that human nature, even if not exposed to Scripture, has an innate sense of what God's law requires. In Romans 2:27, the apostle speaks of "uncircumcision which is by nature." "Uncircumcision," of course, describes the condition in which we were created, while circumcision involves a change to the body. In Romans 11:24, the wild olive tree represents the natural order, while grafting involves a fundamental change to the natural tree. Ephesians 2:3 uses "nature" to refer to our depraved human nature, something all mankind shares since the Fall. Except by God's grace, this condition is permanent and unchange-

⁷⁵ In the New Testament there are three word groups translated in the KJV as "nature," "natural," or "naturally." An example of the first group is in Rom. 1:26; of the second, in 1 Cor. 2:14; and of the third, in James 3:6. For an expanded study of the word found in our chapter, see BDAG, pp. 869-70; Liddell and Scott, pp. 1964-65; Louw and Nida, pp. 586-87; TDNT 9:253-77; NIDNTT, pp. 656-62; Richards, pp. 454-55, and Thayer, pp. 660-61.

⁷⁶ The one unusual use of the word is in Gal. 2:15. Paul refers to "Jews by nature," that is, persons who were Jews by birth or ancestry rather than by creation. Concerning this word, Richards observes, "What is significant, of course, is that while the pagans divorced the order of nature and the essence of things and beings from the notion of creation, Scripture takes no such radical step" (p. 455).

able. These examples represent the use of this word in the New Testament as well as in the secular Greek literature of that period.⁷⁷

With this in mind, it is hard to believe that Paul would use the term “nature” to refer to a mere custom or tradition. Instead, his question in this verse directly appeals to a timeless standard in God’s created order and design. Without fear of counter-argument, and even without offering an explanation, Paul writes that for a man to have long hair is contrary to nature.⁷⁸ He was inspired to do so by God whose prerogative it is to determine what is “natural” and what is not.

See how this verse parallels verse 4. It is a dishonor for a man to pray or prophesy with his head covered. It is also a shame for him to have long hair. If it is shameful for man to have long hair (which nature itself teaches), how much more dishonorable is it for man, the image-bearer of God’s authority, to cover his head while exercising the spiritual gifts of prayer or prophesy in a public setting?

There is a difference between the words translated “dishonoreth” and “shame” in verses 4 through 6 and the word translated “shame” in verse 14. In the earlier verses, the words have to do with the shame one feels with respect to a dishonorable *action*. For example, a thief feels shame if he would be caught in his theft. So, says Paul, for a man to cover his head while praying in public is shameful. The word in verse 14, however, has more to do with a

⁷⁷ Liddell and Scott’s lexicon considers Biblical and non-Biblical literature dating as far back as 1200 BC. Their definition of nature includes the following: “origin;” “the natural form or constitution of a person or thing as a result of growth;” “the regular order of nature;” “the kind, sort, or species of an object.”

⁷⁸ Calvin is mistaken in his comments on this verse. “He [Paul] again sets forth *nature* as the mistress of decorum, and what was at that time in common use by universal consent and custom – even among the Greeks – he speaks of as being *natural*, for it was not always reckoned a disgrace for men to have long hair.” Jonathan Edwards writes, “...there is, I think, no manner of reason for understanding nature otherwise than in the proper sense. The emphasis used...*nature itself*, shows that the apostle does not mean custom, but nature in the proper sense.” Godet agrees, writing that “nature” cannot mean either moral instinct or established usage.

person's status than his activity.⁷⁹ In India, for example, it is shameful to be a member of the lowest caste, regardless of one's activities. So, Paul writes, it is shameful for a man to have long hair. The man's very status is dishonored by it. In like manner, Paul will go on to point out in verse 15 that a woman's long hair is her glory. Hair length affects one's status as a person. This interesting choice of words is actually our first hint that a woman's hair is not the covering Paul refers to earlier in the chapter.

Finally, it is interesting that when Paul writes in verses 14 and 15, "if...have long hair," he uses a conditional clause which, in Greek grammar, expresses the idea that though something may not yet be taking place, if it does, the result is almost always certain.⁸⁰ We do not know if the Christian men at Corinth were thinking of wearing their hair long, or if the women were cutting their hair short, but Paul leaves little doubt about the ramifications of each. Perhaps this was a subtle suggestion that one error often leads to others.⁸¹

Verse 15

But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.

Verse 15 completes the thought Paul began in the verse before.

⁷⁹ NIDNTT pp. 48-52 has a fairly straightforward and interesting discussion of the word used in verse fourteen. The word used to be a technical term for the deprivation of a citizen's rights. Paul's blunt statements about "nature" and "dishonor" with respect to hair were especially challenging to Greek men since some of them, including young Spartan soldiers, wore their hair long (Edwards, p. 281; Meyer, p. 255; Thiselton, p. 844). This is why, if Paul meant "custom" when he wrote "nature," his argument would have made little sense to the Corinthians.

⁸⁰ In Greek grammar, this is called a "third class conditional clause," also known as "future supposition with more probability." Other examples of this construction are Matt. 9:21: "If I shall but touch his garments, I shall be made whole," and John 12:26: "If any man serve me, him will the Father honor."

⁸¹ Is it a mere coincidence that in our society the gradual abandonment of the woman's headcovering in worship coincided historically with the women's suffrage and feminist movements and more recently, with the acceptance of women as office bearers?

“Nature” continues to be the teacher. That which is a dishonor to men is a glory to women. The word translated “glory” has a range of meanings, including splendor, brightness, honor, and similar synonyms. Paul says it is her glory because “hair is given her for a covering.”

By saying this covering “is given,” Paul subtly reminds the Corinthian women that their long hair is a gift of God. In the Greek, the verb tense implies that long hair has been and still *is* given to the woman for a covering. It was not just a fashion of the day.⁸² Just as the woman is the glory of man by creative design (v. 7), so her hair is her glory by the same design (v. 15). When a woman accepts and joyfully lives out her God-ordained role, she is man’s glory. Likewise, when she maintains her long hair, a symbol of agreement with that role, it is her glory.

Paul teaches that hair length is a natural distinction between men and women. It is not an arbitrary one, because it is symbolic of one’s place in God’s created order of authority. The man’s short hair is a symbol of his headship. The woman’s long hair is given her “for a covering,” that is as a symbol of her subordinate role with respect to the man.

Verse 15 is often cited as “proof” that hair is the covering to which Paul is referring throughout the passage. The force of this argument rests on the Greek preposition translated “for” in “given her for a covering.” Since this argument appears very convincing to many who consider it, a detailed discussion of it can be found in chapter 5, especially pages 59-63. To summarize the material presented there, we may safely conclude Paul does not equate the woman’s natural covering of hair with the covering he refers to in previous verses.

Having argued for the use of a headcovering in worship, it is fascinating to realize that Paul doesn’t give us a description of what this

⁸² One wonders how many women ever pause to think they are discarding a covering God gave them when they cut their hair short.

headcovering should look like or out of what material it should be made. Instead the focus is on its purpose, function, and symbolism. Whatever it may look like, it ought to visually symbolize the woman's willing acceptance of her God-given place with respect to man, and it should veil the natural glory of her hair.⁸³

This verse completes Paul's presentation. The head of every man is Christ and the head of the woman is the man (v. 3). A man praying or prophesying with head covered dishonors his head (v. 4). A woman praying or prophesying with head uncovered dishonors her head (vv. 5-6). The man's head ought not to be covered because he is the image and glory of God (especially the authority aspect of image), but the woman should cover her head for she is the glory of the man (v. 7). Nature itself teaches this distinction. God has given women a natural, glorious covering of hair (vv. 14-15).⁸⁴

Verse 16

But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

Having finished his instruction, Paul gives a warning. The verb translated "seem to be" could also be understood "think himself to be" or "is disposed to be." The word translated "contentious" means a lover of strife or quarrels. Taken together, the sense in the Greek is, "But if any man seems to be a lover of strife (and there are such)..." But why does Paul write this?

More than once in his epistles to them, Paul pointed out the Corinthians' tendency to be contentious.⁸⁵ Some of their disputes even ended up in court (6:1ff.). No wonder Paul anticipates resistance to his teaching, even after carefully introducing and explaining it. His conclusion addresses this sinful tendency of theirs toward selfish

⁸³ These thoughts are developed further in chap. 5 of this work, pp. 61-63.

⁸⁴ Short hair on a woman was called shameful in v. 6. The opposite, positive picture is presented in v. 15. Many women today sacrifice their God-given glory on the altar of convenience or fashion, to their shame.

⁸⁵ 1 Cor. 1:10-13, 3:3-4, 11:18; 2 Cor. 12:20.

individualism.⁸⁶

What does Paul say to the contentious? “We have no such custom, neither the churches of God.” “Custom” has a different meaning than the word “ordinances” used in verse 2. “Custom” lacks the binding authority “ordinance” has. To what custom is Paul referring?

One possibility is the practice of women worshipping with uncovered heads. The other is habitual contentiousness. If custom refers to women worshipping with uncovered heads, Paul’s idea is, “Neither we nor the other churches of God share this custom of the Corinthian women.” If contention was what Paul had in mind, then the sense is, “It is not our practice or that of the churches to contend against divine ordinances.” Commentators are divided as to which is the correct interpretation. Perhaps the apostle meant both.⁸⁷

On the one hand, Paul’s appeal to the combined convictions of “we” and the other “churches of God” gives support to what he just taught.⁸⁸ It is like saying, “Not only is this instruction true in the abstract, but it is a truth so widely-recognized that all the other

⁸⁶ We have seen this was one of the main sins among the Christians at Corinth (pp. 37-42 of this study).

⁸⁷ “Custom,” as referring to the practice of worshipping with uncovered head, is favored by Alford, Billroth, Estius, Farrar, Fausset, Fee, Godet, Grotius, Henry, Hodge, Hofman, Marlowe, Morris, Sanseri, Terry, and Thiselton. Its referring to contention is favored by Chrysostom, Calvin, DeWette, Kling, Lenski, Meyer, Reuss, and Rückert. Poole and Gill entertain both possibilities.

⁸⁸ By “we,” Paul might be referring to the other apostles, or perhaps other church leaders.

churches practice it.”⁸⁹ If one looks at verse 16 in this way, then a reference to their contentiousness might seem like a distraction from his train of thought. Besides, as mentioned earlier, we would be surprised to find such a warning right after instruction given for the first time.⁹⁰

On the other hand, it is conceivable that Paul was criticizing their love of contention. It would not have been his first such criticism, and neither would it be his last.⁹¹ After all, this instruction struck at the heart of the very sins that so troubled the congregation.

⁸⁹ Citing Heinrici, Godet writes, “The material proof of this assertion of Paul’s is found in the Christian representations which have been discovered in the Catacombs, where the men always wear their hair cut short, and the women the palla, a kerchief falling over the shoulders, and which can be raised so as to conceal the face” (Godet, p. 132). Edwards cites the early church father Tertulian as saying that not only the married women but also the virgins wore a veil in most of the churches founded by Apostles or apostolic men, including that at Corinth. Chrysostom is also cited as saying that in his time, the injunction of the Apostle was universally obeyed.

⁹⁰The tone Paul used in the latter half of chapter 11 illustrates the sharpness he sometimes used when rebuking disobedience. He had already instructed Corinth about the Lord’s Supper (v. 23). His remarks in vv.11:17ff. are therefore understandably scathing, seeing how they abused the sacrament. The Lord Himself severely chastened them for this sin (v. 30).

⁹¹ See, for example, 1 Cor. 1:11, 3:3, 6:1, 14:33,36-38, and 2 Cor. 12:20.

Chapter Three

Two Pervasive Sins

In this chapter we will consider how two major sins, common among the Christians at Corinth, adversely affected the life of that congregation. Identifying them and keeping them in mind will assist in our understanding Paul's letters to them, including the passage we are studying.

One of these sins was a self-centered and prideful overemphasis of spiritual gifts and attainments. The second was a highly detrimental misunderstanding and misapplication of Christian liberty. The first sin likely had roots in the cultural climate in which the Corinthians lived. The latter may have been aggravated by the Corinthians' not having had much exposure to Scripture, Scriptural principles, or experiential godliness in their past. The following paragraphs sketch the influence these sins had on the way Paul handled several subjects in the epistle.

Liberty and Law

The sin highlighted by Paul in chapter 5 is awful, even by today's standards (v. 1). Paul had already communicated with the Corinthians about sins of this kind, so they could hardly plead ignorance (v. 9). What could account for the fact that believers who were "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:2) not only committed such sins, but even took pride in, gloried in, either the act itself or the reluctance of the church to administer discipline in response to it? (1

Cor. 5:2,6). Were they thinking, “Let us sin that grace may abound?”(Rom. 6:1). Could they have misinterpreted “free indeed” to mean free to do such things? (John 8:36). Whatever the case, the individual involved, and perhaps others in the congregation, took liberties that God’s law clearly forbade.

In his response, Paul makes it clear that a Christian’s liberty ends where God’s law begins. In other words, when God forbids something (fornication in this case), the whole concept of Christian liberty simply does not apply. This is a matter of obedience.

Liberty’s Effects on Others

The Negative Perspective

In chapter 8, Paul makes several references to knowledge (vv. 1-4,7,10). The first two verses inform us that the Christians at Corinth had become proud of this gift. The “freedom” their knowledge brought them emboldened some to sit down in the pagan temples and eat of the food that had been sacrificed to idols. They did not consider how this practice became a stumblingblock to other, weaker brethren. That which these stronger, more knowledgeable brethren considered freedom, Paul called sin (vv. 11-12). Their eating, in and of itself, wasn’t the sin. Their lack of consideration for adversely-affected brethren was. Paul concludes, “Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend” (v. 13).

The Positive Perspective

In the verses that follow, Paul begins to catalog several freedoms to which he was entitled as a believer and a minister of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:1-14). Here was a man liberated by Christ from the Old Testament laws governing food, free to marry, and free to receive wages for his service as a minister of Christ. Yet he voluntarily surrendered these freedoms so that no one could suspect his motivation for preaching the gospel (1 Cor. 9:11-15). In chapter 10 verses 23-33 Paul goes on to make the case that a Christian should voluntarily suspend his lawful liberties if doing so holds the potential of positively affecting the conscience of an unbeliever. For Paul, de-

sires for the salvation and edification of others far outweighed desires for self-gratification.

Liberty and Associations

In the first verses of chapter 10, Paul fixes our attention on the devastating effects of idolatry, regardless of the particular form it takes. Idolatry is serving an alternative god or seeking refuge apart from God. Paul had in mind, not pagan idolaters, but the Old Testament people of God.

Israel had enjoyed so many God-given privileges (vv.1-4), yet many Israelites died outside of God's favor (v. 5). The downfall of some was their lusting after evil things (v. 6). Others perished in gross idolatry (v. 7). A third group fell to sins of the flesh (v. 8). Still others tempted Christ or complained themselves to death (vv. 9-10).

What was Paul's point in rehearsing this sad history? Israel's relationship to God, their privileges from Him and greater familiarity with Him, made them more accountable to Him than Gentiles were. Even though the Jews couldn't imagine God allowing Jerusalem or the temple to be destroyed by the Gentiles, these judgments fell precisely because Israel's idolatrous provocations and abuses of their privileges disparaged the God Who had graciously associated Himself with them.

How did Paul apply this sad history to Corinth? "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (v. 12). In other words, don't you New Testament believers run down the same bitter paths of disobedience and idolatry, thinking your gracious association with God will somehow excuse or minimize your guilt. Your privileges will only aggravate your guilt.

In the latter half of chapter 10, Paul proceeds to apply these lessons about liberty and associations to a new topic, the Lord's Supper. In doing so, he returns to a subject he had already written about in chapter 8 – meat offered to idols. Through their partaking of the Lord's Supper, the Corinthians openly displayed their association with Christ and each other (1 Cor. 10:15-17). It is precisely because

of this public association with Christ that apostle Paul concludes that believers at Corinth ought not to partake of food offered to idols (vv. 20-22). This is saying essentially the same thing as God did in His timeless admonition: “I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and I will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”⁹²

The places we go, the things we do, the people with whom we make relationships – the lawfulness of such choices is not Paul’s focus just now. It is the expediency, even the appropriateness of such associations that he has in view (1 Cor. 10:23). The glory of Christ and of His precious Name is affected by our associations, for good or for ill. Our God is a jealous God.⁹³ This must be considered when we contemplate if or how we exercise our freedom in Christ.

Sins Resurfacing

Bypassing for the moment the headcovering discussion in chapter 11, we find the apostle addressing the subject of spiritual gifts in chapters 12 to 14. Sadly, the Corinthians’ individualistic tendencies (deformed liberty) began rearing its ugly head even in their worship services. In the latter half of chapter 11, for example, Paul admonishes the congregation for their selfish, disorderly attendance at the Lord’s Supper. In the twelfth chapter, Paul patiently explains to them, using the human body as a teaching aid, the Spirit’s sovereignty in distributing spiritual callings and gifts. Then, in chapter 13, he pointedly teaches them that without the presence and exercise of genuine Christian love toward one another, all the gifts and abilities in the world are less than vanity.

Having thus laid down foundational principles, Paul then under-

⁹² Cf. 2 Cor. 6:16b-18, Isa. 52:11, and Ex. 29:45.

⁹³ Ex. 20:5, 34:14, 39:25; Deut. 4:24.

takes a complete reorientation of the Corinthian's worship service in chapter 14. Prophesying unto mutual edification must replace the Corinthians' meaningless display of uninterrupted tongue-speaking.⁹⁴ Order must replace undisciplined spontaneity (vv. 26-30). Women need to return to their honored role in worship (vv. 34-35). "Let all things be done decently and in order," are his concluding words (v. 40).

Chapter 11:1-16?

Based on what we now know, it would not surprise us to find Paul using his instruction about headcoverings and authority also to combat these two predominant sin problems at Corinth, just as he used other topics to do the same elsewhere in this epistle.

Paul begins new instruction with "But I would have you know," just as he used "I would not have you ignorant" to introduce new material in 1 Corinthians 10:1 and in 2 Corinthians 1:8. New instruction was needed because of urgent problems resurfacing. But new instruction could also serve to confront old, well-worn tendencies in sin.

Corinthian Christians, in their zealous but misguided demonstrations of Christian liberty and giftedness, overlooked important principles that are *not* changed by salvation in Christ. Paul would teach in chapter 11, verse 1 to 16 that the fact that women at Corinth were now free from the bondage of sin and death did not mean they were also free from the place God designed women to occupy, irrespective of the Fall. Liberty from sin does not necessarily alter one's calling in life nor does it annul the responsibilities associated with that calling. Equality of essence does not translate into similarity of function.

As Paul is giving his instruction about the headcovering and authority, you can almost see him keeping his eye upon these Corin-

⁹⁴ This is a deformity of liberty or, put another way, a bondage to their so-called freedoms and gifts.

thian tendencies which, if left unchecked, would have eroded authority (v. 3), its associated symbolism (vv. 4-6), and the principles foundational to God's whole authority hierarchy (vv. 7-10). These same sins prompted the apostle's warnings against potential abuse of women by men (vv. 11-12) and against other "unnatural" violations of God's created order and will (vv. 13-15). Paul concludes with an explicit confrontation of these sins by warning them against their sad tendency to blatant individualism and heady contentiousness (v. 16).

Chapter Four

A Worship Service Context?

“Prophesying” Impacts Context

Although it may seem unrelated to our topic, an understanding of what “prophesying” means will affect how, or even if, we think Paul’s instruction should be applied today. To put it another way, if prophesying only took place in a formal worship setting, we might tend to conclude that the apostle’s teaching only applies to that setting today. If the setting was broader, perhaps the application today should also be. Let’s begin by determining what prophesying was.

The Revelatory Nature of Prophecy

God typically communicated to His prophets by visions, dreams, or a voice. Joel, referring to the New Testament age to come, wrote, “...and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,” adding the explanatory words, “your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.”⁹⁵ After receiving God’s revelation, the prophet typically conveyed it to the people orally, many of which prophecies were also recorded in writing later. In general, we find a progression from oral to written communication as the New Testament era approached.

Writing about the nature of Biblical prophecy, O. Palmer

⁹⁵ Compare, for example, Isa. 1:1, Amos 1:1, Obad. 1:1, Mic. 1:1, and Hab. 1:1 with Matt. 1:20, 2:12,13,19,22, and Acts 2:17.

Robertson points out that instead of speaking directly to His people, God used a prophetic mediator to communicate His will to them.⁹⁶ Prophets were to speak God's Word in God's Name (Deut. 18:19).⁹⁷ Peter described the process this way: "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Pet. 1:21).

Passages like Exodus 4:15-16 and Numbers 12:6-7 emphasize the fact that the prophet communicated what God wanted to reveal to His people. These prophecies contained truths which the people would not otherwise have known. For example, in Acts 11:27-28 and 21:10-11, we find the prophet Agabus revealing that there would be a famine. Obviously, the people could not have known about this future event otherwise. The prophet his second prophecy with a slight paraphrase of the ancient prophetic formula, "Thus saith the Holy Ghost."

In Ephesians 3, Paul tells us that only two groups of persons, prophets and apostles, were used by God to reveal hidden truths.⁹⁸ Scripture also teaches that God the Holy Spirit inspired these men to speak or write His word.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ O. P. Robertson, pp. 3-5.

⁹⁷ False prophets who presumed to speak in God's name were severely condemned by Him (Deut. 18:20).

⁹⁸ In 1 Cor. 13, Paul associates the gift of prophecy with the "mystery," God's yet-unrevealed will. In v. 2, he links the "gift of prophecy" with understanding "all mysteries and all knowledge." 1 Cor. 14:6, however, appears to distinguish speaking "by revelation" from speaking "by prophesy." Yet in light of vv. 26 ("hath a revelation") and 30 ("If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by"), it appears that v. 6 actually sets up a kind of parallelism. "Revelation" and "knowledge" are the substance of the communication, whereas "prophesying" and "doctrine" [Gr., teaching] are the modes of communication. Calvin says that this verse speaks of two classes of communication: revelation dispensed by prophesying and knowledge communicated by doctrine (20:438). Bengel, T. Edwards, Fausset, Godet, Hodge, Meyer, Lange, Lenski, and Wilson agree. Morris associates "revelation" and "prophesy." Fee, quoting Barrett, writes, "All these activities...shade too finely into one another for rigid distinctions" (p. 663).

⁹⁹ 2 Sam. 23:2, 2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet. 1:21

Contrast that above with God's description of the false prophet in Jeremiah 23:16, "Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Harken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD."

Some have suggested that "prophesy" can also mean singing or delivering a previously-prepared sermon and is therefore an activity that continues today. As attractive as this idea might be, it lacks solid Biblical support.¹⁰⁰ One would expect that if the term "prophesying" still had relevance, so would the term "prophet."

¹⁰⁰ Commenting on 1 Cor. 11:4, Gill broadens the meaning of prophesy to include explaining God's Word and singing Psalms. Best and Beza concur. Yet 1 Cor. 14:26 teaches that prophesying is distinct from explaining Scripture. Paul mentions singing ("hath a Psalm"), teaching ("hath a doctrine"), speaking in tongues ("hath a tongue"), prophesying ("hath a revelation"), and "interpretation" (of an unknown tongue) as distinct activities in the worship service. As to singing, Ex. 15:20-21 and 1 Chron. 25:1-3 (the typical "proof texts") are inconclusive. Though 1 Chron. 25:3 says several individuals "prophesied with the harp," v. 5 teaches, "All these were the sons of Heman the king's seer in the words of God," seer being the ancient word for prophet. God revealed His will to the seer who in turn revealed it to the congregation by means of song. This is precisely what the Psalmists David, Asaph, and Heman did (see Ps. 50,73-83,88 and 2 Sam. 23:1-2). Gaffin defines prophecy as "...a revelatory gift; that is, it brings to the church the words of God in the primary and original sense. Prophecy is not, at least primarily or as one of its necessary marks, the interpretation of an already existing inspired text or oral tradition but is itself the inspired, non-derivative word of God" (p. 59). Hodge says it is "to speak under divine inspiration...to deliver, as the organ of the Holy Ghost, the messages of God to men, whether in the form of doctrine, exhortation, consolation, or prediction" (pp. 119-120).

Concerning references to prophesy in the "Form of Ordination of the Ministers of God's Word" (p. 141 of *The Psalter*, 1991 ed.), the Form paraphrases Eph. 4:11 saying "that the Lord Jesus Christ hath given some apostles and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and ministers of God's Word," distinguishing the offices of prophet, pastor, and minister. This distinction is repeated later: "*First*. That they [ministers] faithfully explain to their flock the Word of the Lord, revealed by the writings of the prophets and the apostles." But in a reference to 1 Cor. 14:3, the Form reads, "Likewise, he that prophesieth (that is, preacheth God's Word), speaketh unto men to edification..." The parenthetical explanation contradicts the earlier references; It is inconsistent with Scripture.

The public nature of prophesy is self-evident. God's will was communicated to the prophet and by him to others.

Finally, both the Old and New Testaments make it plain that God used both men and women to prophesy, though examples of the latter are relatively few by comparison.¹⁰¹

In summary, Scripture teaches that prophesy was the revelation of God's will through a prophet to others. The Holy Spirit inspired prophets and apostles to communicate God's will. The prophetic word was designed to affect more than the prophet himself. Both men and women were used by God as instruments of revelation.

The Context of Biblical Prophecy

Having seen something of the nature of prophecy, the next thing to consider is the setting in which prophesying took place.

Was prophesying limited to public worship services? To answer that, we must first try to define what a worship service was in Bible times.

Before Moses, group worship took place mostly within one's extended family.¹⁰² After God's nation-church of Israel began, public worship shifted to the tabernacle and later on to the temple. God gave His people detailed instructions as to how He would be worshipped in those places. In the New Testament, however, with the exception of 1 Corinthians 14 and a few other verses, we know comparatively little about the church's formal, public worship.¹⁰³ When Paul, for example, in Philemon 1:2 writes to the "church in

¹⁰¹ Cf. Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:16-17. See also Acts 21:9.

¹⁰² Consider, for example, Gen. 8:20, 12:7, 35:7. Moses himself built and worshipped at an altar (Ex. 17:15) before the pattern of the tabernacle was given him (Ex. 25).

¹⁰³ 1 Cor. 14:26 informs us that singing was part of the worship; Acts 20:7 points to the central place preaching had; 1 Cor. 11:20ff. indicates a regular use of the Lord's Supper; 1 Cor. 16:2 suggests almsgiving, and Acts 2:42 and 1 Cor. 14:14-15 add the element of prayer. These are the elements that should characterize public worship today.

thy house,” is he describing what we refer to today as a “house church” or was he simply addressing believers in Philemon’s family?¹⁰⁴ Notwithstanding this lack of detail with regard to the New Testament setting, Scripture tells us enough to conclude that prophesy was not limited to the formal worship service. However, it always took place in a group setting.¹⁰⁵

One way to view 1 Corinthians 11 is to say that this was Paul’s instruction about a situation as it existed, addressing first the male-female authority issue and later, in chapter 14, dealing with how the corporate worship should be conducted.¹⁰⁶ Another point of view is that Paul was giving guidance to women who prophesied in settings other than the worship service. One thing is certain – that women were *not* to prophesy in public worship services (1 Cor. 14:34-35). Therefore, we cannot be certain, merely from the fact that women were prophesying at Corinth, whether Paul’s instruction in chapter 11 verses 1-16 should be limited to corporate worship or whether it addresses a wider context.¹⁰⁷ We must look further to know with certainty to what settings Paul would have his instruction applied.

Clues Suggesting a Public Worship Context

One clue indicating that Paul might have had a corporate worship setting in view are the similar expressions he uses in verses 2 and 17. In speaking about their keeping the ordinances delivered to them, Paul praises them. When turning to the subject of the Lord’s Supper, which sacrament involved public corporate worship, he

¹⁰⁴ See also Rom. 16:5, 1 Cor. 16:19, and Col. 4:15. 1 Cor. 16:19 is particularly interesting because we know from 1 Cor. 14 that the church at Corinth did gather for group worship.

¹⁰⁵ Compare, for example, 1 Cor. 14 with Acts 11:28 and 21:10-11.

¹⁰⁶ Some say that 1 Cor. 14:34-35 merely forbids women from *regulating* prophesy in worship (cf. v. 29). This is incorrect. The writer is focusing on the advantages of prophesy and the need for interpreting unknown tongues. Only v. 29, and perhaps v. 32, touches on judging or evaluating. It is *speaking*, not *judging*, that Paul forbids. Women are even instructed to even reserve their questions for when they are home with their husbands (v. 35).

¹⁰⁷ Examples of women prophesying in settings other than worship include Luke 1:40-45, 67-79; John 11:47-51; and Acts 19:1-6, 21:8-11.

writes, “I praise you not.” Some suggest that his use of similar expressions links the settings of these two passages.

A second possible hint that the apostle has a corporate worship context in mind is his mention of angels in verse 10. There are a number of texts in Scripture that suggest that angels are especially, though not exclusively, present and interested in the corporate worship setting of God’s church. Was not an angel instrumental in bringing about the worship service that took place in the house of Cornelius? (Acts 10:3ff). If the angels of Christ’s “little ones” do always behold the face of God in heaven, is it not reasonable to assume that there are at least as many angels looking on with interest as there are saints gathering for corporate worship? (Matt. 18:10). If “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth,” how attentive must angels be to the worship service, an event at which repentance commonly takes place (Luke 15:10). If, according to Peter, angels desired to look into those matters “which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you,” would not the same angels be interested in the gospel being preached today? (1 Pet. 1:12). If angels “are...all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation,” would we not expect them to gather with the saints as they worship the Lord and receive His instruction? Hebrews 12:18-24, in referring to the church of God here on earth, associates it with “an innumerable company of angels.” With these verses in mind, Paul’s mention of angels in 1 Corinthians 11:10 adds some support to the idea that Paul was referring to corporate worship when writing about the headcovering.¹⁰⁸

One other clue that could connect verses 2-16 with public worship is the position of the passage in the epistle as a whole. The subject

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Edwards suggests, “The angels are mentioned as examples to the woman of holy creatures that keep their place of subordination. Their place is to be ministering servants unto men; yet they rebel not” (p. 278). Senseri quotes Robert Dabney: “The holy angels who are present as invisible spectators, hovering over the Christian assemblies, would be shocked by seeing women professing godliness publicly throw off this appropriate badge of their position” (p. 86).

of public worship, and particularly the celebration of the Lords' Supper, immediately precedes and follows these verses.¹⁰⁹ Public worship continues as the theme until the end of chapter 14.

Arguments Against a Public Worship Context

Conflicting Instruction about Women Prophesying?

One argument against 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 being applied to public worship goes something like this: In verse 5 Paul appears to be permitting the practice of women praying and prophesying so long as they do so with covered heads. In 1 Corinthians 14 the apostle expressly forbids women from speaking in worship services (vv. 34-35).¹¹⁰ The apostle writes a similar prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:11-12. Therefore, it is reasoned, 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 cannot be speaking of a worship setting, but perhaps some smaller gathering of people.¹¹¹ Let's consider this argument.

Recall that Paul wrote this epistle partly in response to questions being asked him by the Corinthians. In chapter 11 he appears to be responding to what was actually happening at Corinth, giving instruction for the first time about the issues raised. He seems to deal with one issue in chapter 11 (women reflecting a due regard for God-ordained authority) and another in chapter 14 (the regulation of corporate worship). In chapter 11, the apostle lays the theological groundwork which is foundational to his teaching in chapter 14 verse 34. Three other times in First Corinthians, Paul brings up an

¹⁰⁹ Cf. 1 Cor. 10:16-24 and 1 Cor. 11:17ff.

¹¹⁰ Seven verses in that chapter directly reference "church" (vv. 4, 5, 12, 19, 23, 28, 35).

¹¹¹ This is the view of Meyer, for example. Fee says that Paul would be wasting his time "condemning a forbidden method of doing a forbidden thing" (p. 508, n. 67). North goes so far as to say that with the departure of the gift of prophesy from the church, this regulation about headcoverings was also abrogated. He neglects, however, to address the other activity mentioned in v. 5 and exclusively in v. 13, i.e., prayer, which continues in public worship till this day.

issue, only to complete his discussion of it later.¹¹² In light of these three examples, it is entirely consistent for Paul to address the subject of women prophesying in chapter 11 with one purpose in view, and return to the same subject for a different purpose in chapter 14.¹¹³

¹¹² The first example of this is 1 Cor. 6:1-4 where Paul pleads that saints should settle disputes among themselves rather than using secular courts. But in v. 7 of that chapter, Paul says he would rather they “take wrong” and “suffer themselves to be defrauded;” instruction that seems to mute, if not override the first. The principle behind the first instruction stands, however – namely, that the wisdom God gives the church in moral and ethical matters is superior to that of the world. The second principle is also true; sometimes it is preferable to settle disputes by simply dropping them, even if that means personal loss.

The second example is found in chap. 8 where Paul neither encourages nor discourages the eating of food offered to idols, except when eating might negatively affect the “weak brother” (vv. 9-13). “But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse” (v. 8). In chap. 10, however, he instructs all Corinthian Christians to abstain from the offered food (compare vv. 14, 19-21, 23, and 28). The prohibition is appropriate, considering the overall point Paul was making in chap. 10 (see also “Liberty and Associations” on pp. 39-40 of this study).

The third example has to do with the Lord’s Supper. In chap. 11 vv. 17ff., we learn that the Corinthian celebration of the Lord’s Supper had become so disorderly that God visited the congregation with sickness and even death (v. 30). With this alarming state of affairs, one would think that Paul would at least drop a hint about the situation when he first brings up the Lord’s Supper in chap. 10. Yet because the Lord’s Supper was not the focus of that chapter, Paul postpones his mention of the abuses until he begins his detailed instruction about the Lord’s Supper itself in the second half of chap. 11.

¹¹³ Best, Calvin, Farrar, Fausset, Henry, Hodge, Lange, J. Murray, and Wilson agree that Paul concludes in chap. 14 what he began in chap. 11. Weeks suggests this translation: “Every woman praying or prophesying, by means of the unveiling of the head dishonors her head.” He adds, “The man cannot cover his head when he engages in an authoritative function. For a woman to engage in prayer or prophecy would place her in the same position as the man. That is, she would be forced to exercise headship and thus uncover her head. An uncovering of her head accompanies her act of prayer and prophecy. There is a similarity in thought [but] a difference in structure [between vv. 4-5] because the point of each is different. The argument of v. 4 is that a man may not pray or prophecy with head covered. Verse 5 begins the argument that a woman may not pray or prophecy” (p. 26).

It is not an ironclad argument to say that 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 cannot be about a corporate worship setting, because then the apostle would be regulating a practice in chapter 11 that he forbids in chapter 14. More than once, Paul finishes his treatment of a subject in a different chapter from that in which he began it.

Verses 17-18 a Transition?

A second argument against the public worship context is the apparent distinction Paul makes between verses 1-16 and 17-34. This distinction, it is suggested, is highlighted by the expressions “come together” (v. 17) and “when ye come together in the church” (v. 18). Since verses 1-16 don’t have such expressions, chapter 11 must relate to some other setting. People holding this view say Paul begins his instruction about corporate worship in verse 17, not in verse 2.

This argument is actually self-defeating. If the wording in verse 17 marks a new setting, one could just as easily conclude that verse 34 ends that setting, for there Paul seems to say that any further instruction about public worship would have to wait till a future visit to Corinth. He does, however, seamlessly return to the subject in great detail in chapter 14. From this we learn that when Paul explicitly mentions a context for his instruction, then context is important. If he doesn’t, its omission was not an oversight. Unless a context can be clearly determined, we should not try to artificially assign one.

Narrowing the Focus

Since the arguments considered so far do not clearly limit 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 to a public worship setting, we should conclude that Paul has a broader application in view. This is not surprising. The principles taught in these verses involve a whole range of important issues like liberty, propriety, and authority. Paul clearly avoids explicitly mentioning a context of application so that his instruction would be followed in any setting where these principles apply.

Let’s review what we’ve learned so far in this chapter.

- In verses 4-5 the activity mentioned is praying or prophesying.

Prophecy was done both inside and outside of corporate public worship services. At the very least, the formal gathering of God's church for worship would be one setting in which the woman's headcovering is appropriate. There could be others.

- In verse 13 prayer alone is mentioned. Though not explicitly stated in chapter 11, it appears (because of his prohibitions in 1 Cor. 14:34, 35 and 1 Tim. 2:12-13) that Paul would have the woman's head covered even when joining in silence to the audible prayers offered by men.
- Though less conclusive, 1 Corinthians 14:35 seems to suggest that the headcovering would not be necessary in the home setting when the woman is alone with her family. Her wearing it in family worship might, however, reinforce role distinctions in the eyes of the children.
- These principles would reasonably apply to young girls in similar settings.

One of the challenges of the Christian life is rightly applying Biblical principles to a variety of situations. This is no less true with regard to the headcovering. Answering a few simple questions, however, can help women determine the appropriate times for wearing one.

- Are believers gathered for worship?
- Is it a public setting?
- Will a man offer prayer on behalf of the group or otherwise lead in spiritual exercises?

An affirmative answer to all three questions indicates an appropriate setting for a woman to wear her headcovering. This would include prayer services, mixed-gender Bible studies, catechism and confession of faith classes and programs, weddings, funerals, and virtually any public, group activity where a man leads the group in some form of worship, including prayer. As said before, it is less certain whether the headcovering is required when the woman is alone with her husband and immediate family.

As we look to God for guidance in these matters, unreservedly de-

siring to please Him through obedience to His Word, He will graciously give wisdom and clarity, also with respect to applying these principles to our daily situations.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ One hindrance is our tendency to view certain religious activities as something other than worship. Is a choir program worship, or is it something else? How about a Sunday school program, a wedding, a funeral, or a Bible study during which prayer is offered and God's Word recited or explained? Perhaps prayerfully trying to restore worship into such activities will help us better discern when the head-covering principle should be applied.

A family originally from Russia once came to visit and worship with us. Before the first service, they ate lunch at the home of one of the elders. As soon as the elder prepared to read and pray at the end of the meal, the Russian wife reached into her purse, pulled out her kerchief, and put it on her head. She removed it as soon as the elder finished praying. God provided us with a living example of the very principles we were pondering at the time.

Chapter Five

The Headcovering Itself

In this chapter we will try to find out what Paul meant when he wrote that a woman's head was to be covered. Let's consider this matter from a few different perspectives.

The Words Themselves

Etymology is the study of the history, development, and use of words. We begin this chapter by looking at the words and expressions Paul uses to describing the veiling or covering of the head in the passage we've been studying. As we do, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of only looking at a passage etymologically.

Our passage (verses 5 and 13) is the only instance in the New Testament where the adjective "uncovered" is used. The only use of it in the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Old Testament is Leviticus 13:45 where the leper is commanded to cover his upper lip.¹¹⁵

The verb form is found only three times in the New Testament, each of them in our chapter (twice in verse 6 and once in verse 7). In the Septuagint, the verb was used to translate Hebrew words meaning to cover or disclose and was typically associated with inanimate objects. The only three exceptions were Tamar, who covers herself (likely veils herself) in anticipation of the arrival of her father-in-law Judah (Gen. 38:15); Ahab, when he disguises himself

¹¹⁵ The Septuagint is the highly respected Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. It was produced by seventy elders laboring in Alexandria, Egypt in the 3rd century, B.C. It was almost certainly used by Christ Himself.

for battle (2 Chron. 18:29); and the angels of Isaiah 6:2, who cover their faces in the presence of Jehovah.

The main idea of covering clearly emerges from these few passages.¹¹⁶

Historical Considerations

If we turn to the writings of secular historians, we are faced with a daunting lack of agreement as to what the prevailing customs were in Paul's day regarding hair and headcoverings.

Thiselton for example, citing Oster, says archaeological evidence from this period in Roman history points to the Roman *men* using a liturgical headcovering when praying or prophesying.¹¹⁷ Thomas Edwards, citing Macrobius and Plutarch, said Greek men *and* women typically prayed with *uncovered* heads.¹¹⁸ Godet, citing Plutarch, says the female Greek slave had her hair shorn in token of her servitude and the Hebrew adulteress of her shame (Num. 5:18).¹¹⁹ Yet Gordon Fee contends that "there is almost no evidence (paintings, reliefs, statuary, etc.) that men in any of the cultures (Greek, Roman, or Jew) covered their heads" for worship. According to his research, the Jewish *tallith* (prayer shawl), to which some refer, appears to have come into use later in history.¹²⁰

It seems highly speculative, therefore, to try to argue from history and archeology that Paul was trying to impose upon the Corinthians a practice either from his Jewish cultural background or elsewhere.

¹¹⁶ There has been considerable discussion in the literature about whether this expression "uncovered" refers to "loosed hair" (e.g., Thiselton, pp. 830ff.). This follows the idea that the covering alluded to all along is a woman's long hair. In addition to the chapter you are now reading, see the discussion on v. 15, pp. 31-33.

¹¹⁷ Thiselton, p. 823.

¹¹⁸ T. Edwards, p. 270. Thiselton cites Horsley in support of this finding.

¹¹⁹ Godet, vol. 2, pp. 104-105.

¹²⁰ Fee, p. 507.

Biblical Considerations

Old Testament Symbolism

The connection between the veil or headcovering and the principle of headship has its roots in the Old Testament. Recall, for example, how Abimelech said to Sarah, “Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee.” In other words, the King of Gerar was saying that Abraham was the covering God had given Sarah – i.e., her veil, protection, her guardian authority figure. Under the guise of being Abraham’s brother, she had endangered herself by removing the “veil” of her husband’s protection.

The same kind of symbolism is seen in the story of Ruth’s visit to Boaz at the threshingfloor. In Ruth 3:9; she asks Boaz “to cover” her with his garment, speaking metaphorically that she would have him take her under his care and protection as his wife.

In Isaiah 6, we read that the angels covered their faces in the presence of God, showing by this act due reverence to their King.

Interestingly, this symbolism is not entirely lost today, even in our Western culture. At weddings, the bride typically enters the church veiled, arm in arm with (still under the protection of) her father or other guardian figure (head). Once her veil is lifted, a transfer of headship and authority takes place. The words, “Who gives this bride to this man?” and the response, “Her mother and I do,” complete the transfer.

As we shall see in a moment, the same connection between the headcovering and authority can be seen in the passage we are studying.

Unusual Wording

The words God inspired Paul to use in 1 Corinthians 11 are noteworthy. Not once in the passage does he use the common Greek

noun for veil.¹²¹ With the exception of verses 4 and 15, he uses the adjective “uncovered” and the verb “be covered” instead.

Some may argue that if Paul meant for women to wear a veil, he would have plainly said so, just as he did in 2 Corinthians 3:13-16 when describing the veiling of Moses’ face.

When considering verse 4, however, we saw that sometimes Paul’s word choices enable him to address more than one matter at the same time – in that case, the headcovering and long hair.

When Paul speaks of “head” in verse 3, he does so in the sense of authority figure. In the verses following, Paul continues to allow this sense to color his use of “head,” even when referring to the man or woman’s literal, physical head. In other words, the man, because he is an authority figure (“head”) established by God, ought not cover or obscure his literal head in worship because doing so would obscure his headship.¹²² The woman, on the other hand, ought to cover her head while worshipping in the presence of male authorities out of deference to them. When she acts inappropriately, Paul says, the woman not only shames her literal head, but also her figurative head (the authority figure in whose presence she is worshipping).

By means of his unusual word choices, the apostle purposely avoids having the reader focus exclusively on the material headcovering and the literal head. He would have us, at the same time, consider the other important principles he is teaching.

¹²¹ Though Paul doesn’t use this noun in 1 Cor. 11, he does use it in 2 Cor. 3:13-16 when writing about the “vail” Moses put on when coming down from Horeb. In 1 Cor. 11, with the exception of vv. 4 and 15, he uses either the verb or adjectival form of the same root. Even in secular Greek writings, the verb was used to mean both to veil as well as to cover (Liddell & Scott, p. 893; TDNT, III:561-562).

¹²² It is interesting that today (e.g., in the federal tax code) we still find the expression “head of household” used to describe one who has certain legal authority.

What About Her Hair?

A number of contemporary writers suggest that verse 15 convincingly proves that Paul was really talking about a woman's hair length throughout this passage. In the latter part of the verse we read, "...for her hair is given her for a covering."¹²³ This argument rests on the Greek preposition translated "for."

Though this Greek preposition frequently includes the idea of substitution, it sometimes does not. Exhaustive research on the word, using both the New Testament and extra-Biblical literature, led Waltke to conclude that it "...always has either the local meanings of *opposite*, *over against* or the metaphorical meaning of substituting one thing for another which may result in either the meaning *in exchange for* or *instead of*."¹²⁴ The leading Greek lexicons include in their entries "corresponding to" and "equal to."¹²⁵ Does Paul mean her hair is given *in place of* a material covering, or is he saying her hair is a gift *corresponding to*, but not necessarily replacing, the covering referred to in the rest of the passage?

Suppose Paul is saying hair is the covering he meant throughout the passage. How would this affect the meaning of these verses? Verses 5 and 6 would read, "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth having short hair dishonoreth her head: for that is even all one as if she had her hair shaved off. For if the woman have not long hair, let her also have her hair cut short: but if it be a shame for a woman to have her hair cut short or shaved off, let her have

¹²³ Such is the view of Murphy-O'Connor, Martin, Hurley, Padgett, and Horsley as cited by Thiselton (p. 824), to name a few.

¹²⁴ Waltke's quote is taken from his Th.D. dissertation, "The Theological Significations $\alpha\nu\tau\iota$ and $\Upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$ in the New Testament."

¹²⁵ BDAG's second entry for this preposition reads, "In order to indicate that one thing is equivalent to another" (p. 73). Liddell & Scott's entry reads, "In Homer often to denote equivalence" and "equal to, like as...corresponding" (p. 153). We find the same in NIDNTT 3:1179 and Thayer, p. 49. Writing about doctrinal passages which teach the substitutionary nature of Christ's death, Robertson says, "...not because $\alpha\nu\tau\iota$ of itself means "instead," which is not true, but because the context renders any other resultant idea out of the question" (p. 573 of his grammar).

long hair.” Essentially, the verses would be saying if a woman has short hair it is the same as having short hair (v. 5), or if she has short hair, let also her hair be cut short (v. 6a). This borders on nonsense.¹²⁶

Some say that Paul’s whole aim in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is to maintain gender distinctions at Corinth, and that this goal is what he has in view when comparing the woman’s hair with a veil or covering. Such a goal would certainly have been understandable, especially considering the Corinthian tendency to misapply Christian liberty in many different ways.¹²⁷ But if this was indeed Paul’s aim, why

¹²⁶ Fee writes, “Since there is sufficient evidence that *anti* can also mean ‘that one thing is equivalent to another,’ there is no need to force the rigid concept of replacement onto this sentence” (p. 529). Robertson adds, “It is not in the place of a veil, but answering to (*anti*, as in the sense of *anti* in John 1:16), as a permanent endowment...” (*Word Pictures* 4:162). Waltke writes, “When Paul says that a woman’s hair ‘is given her for...a covering,’ he cannot mean ‘in place of’ a covering, but rather ‘asking for’ a covering. Although the Greek preposition frequently implies substitution, that is not its sense here, for such a meaning would render the rest of the argument, especially that in vv. 5–6, nonsensical. Therefore, the preposition is used here nearer to its original meaning of ‘over against.’ Her long hair stands ‘over against’ and ‘corresponds to’ the covering desiderated for the public assembly” (*Bibliotheca Sacra* 135: 537, p. 55). Weeks writes, “This explanation does not accord with vv. 5-6. If the covering is merely long hair, there would be no need to argue that being uncovered is the same as being shaven. To take off the covering would be to shave the head” (p. 24). Wallace comments,

Verses 10 and 15 would have to be saying the same thing if long hair is the same as a head covering. But this can hardly be the case. In v. 10, a woman is required to wear a ‘symbol of authority.’ Such a symbol represents her submission, not her glory. Paul begins the verse by pointing back to v. 9.... Because ‘woman was created for the sake of man’ she ought to wear a symbol of authority on her head. But in v. 15, a woman’s long hair is her glory. The Greek is even more emphatic.... A literal translation would be: ‘it is a glory to her’ or ‘a glory accruing to her,’ or ‘to her advantage.’ Surely this is not the point of v. 10! To argue, then, that long hair is the woman’s head covering seems to miss the very point of the function of the head covering and of the long hair: one shows her submission while the other shows her glory. Both of these are contrasted with an uncovered head while praying or prophesying, or a shaved head at any time: such would speak of the woman’s humiliation and shame.

¹²⁷ A problem described at some length in chap. 3 of this work, pp. 37-42.

would the apostle limit the application of this lesson to the worship setting? Do not gender distinctions need to be maintained even in the absence of prayer or prophesy?¹²⁸

A further difficulty with the hair-equals-covering view is the word Paul uses for “covering” in verse 15. If the apostle wanted to equate nature’s covering with the covering referred to in previous verses, one would expect him to choose the common Greek word for veil or covering (one which shares the same root as the noun and verb forms used in verses 5-7 and 13). Instead, in verse 15, Paul uses an entirely different and unrelated word that typically means “mantle” or “wrap.” There is no indication in Scripture or elsewhere that this word ever referred to a veil or headcovering.¹²⁹ If Paul meant to say that a woman’s hair is her headcovering, it is hard to imagine why he would choose a word never associated with that meaning.

Let’s try to piece things together. Earlier in the chapter, Paul introduced God’s authority hierarchy (v. 3). Because man is God’s image bearer, especially with respect to authority, his head should not be covered while praying or prophesying (v. 4). Because the woman does not typically share this authority aspect of image, she is to be covered in a worship context (v. 5). Man is the image and glory of God (v. 7a). Woman is the glory of the man, particularly as she fulfills her God-given role (v. 7b). The woman’s hair is her glory (v.

¹²⁸ The idea that gender differentiation is the main point of the passage is offered by Thiselton (p. 846) and Bordwine (p. 76). Weeks writes, “There is no suggestion that the women in Corinth were shaving their heads. Or if the passage were teaching the inappropriateness of short hair for women, then all the discussion about prayer and prophecy would be irrelevant. If Paul believes that short hair is unbecoming for a woman, then surely it is not unbecoming only for a woman who leads in prayer and prophecy” (p. 24).

¹²⁹ The word translated in v. 15 as “covering” literally means “something thrown around one.” Aside from v. 15, Liddell & Scott give no other citation from Greek literature in support of the word meaning veil or headcovering (pp. 1369-70). See also BGAG p. 646. For the typical Greek word for veil, see 2 Cor. 3:13-16; Liddell and Scott, p. 871; TDNT, 3:558ff.; NIDNTT 2:212; Thayer, p. 322.

15a). While in the presence of God and men for worship, she should therefore cover *her* glory (her hair). In verses 14-15 Paul goes on to say that nature itself teaches us this principle by giving the woman a natural covering, a lasting reminder of her role with respect to man. His short hair reflects his role as head. With this in mind, verses 5-6 now make perfect sense. The woman, discarding nature's covering in any context brings shame upon her head. The same woman, appearing in worship without the headcovering (a symbol of her submission) also shames herself. If the man adopts nature's covering, he brings shame upon himself. Covering his head during worship also brings him shame.

If the woman's hair is not the headcovering called for in these verses, what is? Perhaps this is the most interesting aspect of this whole passage. Paul does not give a single detail about the material of which the covering should be made. He suggests no dimensions. We have no information about its pattern or color. What we are given are its purpose and function.

The woman's head should be *covered*. A comparison of verses 5 and 7 with verse 15 suggests that this covering should not only veil the woman's head, but also her glory (her long hair). Its design and appearance should reflect what it symbolizes, cheerful submission to authority. This would suggest something simple rather than something ornate or attention-getting. The absence of physical details in this passage suggests the Spirit's intention to allow a flexibility in design, which accommodates a variety of cultural settings – as long as the covering fulfills its intended purpose.

Not all hats worn by women in worship today meet these simple criteria. Some are too ornate to appropriately reflect humble submission, while others are so small they hardly cover the woman's head, not to mention her hair.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Does this perhaps explain the origin of women wearing their hair in a “bun” under their hats? It was once fairly common that many women's “Sunday” hats had a veil-like netting draping down from the brim, covering part of the head and face.

Summary

The headcovering Paul prescribes is a literal, material one. It's appearance ought to reflect the female worshipper's cheerful and humble submission to her Lord and to God-ordained authorities in her life. The covering should reflect modesty, sobriety, and should veil the woman's hair. Rather than rigid specifications, Paul gives us a few simple God-honoring principles to follow.

Chapter Six

About Authority

It was pointed out earlier in this study that in every verse of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 in which the term “man” or “woman” appears, Paul uses Greek words that could also be translated “husband” and “wife.”¹³¹ He never uses the ordinary Greek term for man which makes no reference to the marital state.¹³² Some therefore believe that the apostle is only writing about the headship of a husband over his wife.

There are a number of passages in the New Testament, however, in which these words clearly refer to unmarried persons.¹³³ Though Paul could have used other words, the context (and particularly vv. 3, 7, 8, 12, 14, and 15) makes it clear that he intended the wider definitions and not just “husband” and “wife.” He is not, for example, teaching in verse 3 that Christ is only the Head of husbands, or in verse 12 that only husbands are born of women. Instead, it appears the Spirit purposely chose these words precisely because of their overlapping range of meaning – giving some emphasis but not excluding the broader meaning. We conclude, therefore, that the

¹³¹ See p. 12 and notes 20-22 of this study.

¹³² As he does in 1 Cor. 2:9, 4:1, 6:18, etc.

¹³³ For example, see Luke 1:42, Luke 4:26, John 1:30 (Jesus), John 4:18, or 1 Cor. 7:1. Rom. 7:2 is interesting because Paul there qualifies the Greek term pertaining to the female with the words “which hath an husband,” indicating that in his mind this word does not always mean “wife.” For English readers, consult Strong’s number 1135. For those able to look up Greek words in a lexicon, consider the entries for these words in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* or Thayer’s *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

apostle was not limiting his instruction to married couples.

One might ask how single women could be considered under the authority of men. Scripture gives us a variety of possibilities. In Numbers 30:1-8 for example, a passage which addresses women making vows, the single woman is said to be under the authority of her father while the married woman is under the authority of her husband. Office bearers have a responsibility to care for aged widows.¹³⁴ Civil authorities routinely exercise headship over women, particularly with respect to their protection.

Every person, regardless of gender, lives under multiple layers of God-ordained authorities, as verse 3 points out. Paul's mention of Christ as Servant in that verse should keep us from viewing submission to authority as something negative. God's Word reminds us how we are to submit to earthly authorities – as unto Him.¹³⁵

The apostle's appeal to creation in verse 9 supports what he wrote in verse 3. He points us to the account of woman's creation in Genesis 2:18 in which Moses wrote, "And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him." The expression "an help meet for him" literally means "a helper corresponding to him,"¹³⁶ or as Delitzsch translates it, "a help of his like."¹³⁷ Even before the Fall, man was given the responsibility to lead and the woman to assist.

Modern feminism tends to cloud the important distinction between equality and uniqueness, as if Eve's being created a helper to Adam somehow suggests that women are inferior to men. One does not have to do the same work as another to be his equal. A number of Scripture passages clearly teach that equality can be perfectly com-

¹³⁴ Consider, e.g., 1 Tim. 5:3, 9. Interestingly, passages like Gen. 38:11 and Ruth 1:8 indicate that the widow typically returned to her parents' home after her husband's death. See also Deut. 16:11 and James 1:27.

¹³⁵ See Rom. 13:1-4, Eph. 5:22, 6:5-7, and Col. 3:22-23.

¹³⁶ This translation is taken from the second of Prof. Futato's two *Banner Conference* addresses (see Bibliography, p. 42).

¹³⁷ Keil and Delitzsch 1:54.

patible with submission.¹³⁸

The distinction in authority between men and women with respect to authority continues after the Fall. In Gen. 3:16b, God said to Eve, “Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” Whatever else the last part of this verse means, it is certainly saying that Eve would now be subject to Adam’s fallen will. The effects of this judgment remain with us today.¹³⁹

Even in the New Testament, evidence abounds that the unique roles of men and women with regard to authority continue.¹⁴⁰ Ephesians 5:22-24 goes so far as to link a wife’s submission to her husband with the church’s submission to Christ. 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 apply these unique roles to the worship context.¹⁴¹

We must not lose sight of the fact that the description of the woman’s role in relation to the man in 1 Corinthians 11:3 is placed between references to man’s submission to Christ and Christ’s to God. Being under Christ’s authority means every man is directly answerable to Him, also with respect to how he uses his authority over others – including his wife.¹⁴² Ephesians 5:25-28 provides much to think about in this respect; Christ’s care for His church is the example each husband must follow in his relationship with his

¹³⁸ Compare, for example, verses like Gen. 1:27, 1 Cor. 11:11-12, and Gal. 3:27-28 with Gen. 2:18, 1 Cor. 11:9, 1 Tim. 2:11-13, and 1 Pet. 3:1, 5. Perhaps the most powerful passage illustrating this is Phil. 2:5-7.

¹³⁹ As do the other judgments pronounced in Gen. 3:14-19.

¹⁴⁰ Consider Col. 3:18, Titus 2:4-5, and 1 Pet. 3:1.

¹⁴¹ Paul’s appeal to the creation account in 1 Tim. 2 is clear. Gal. 3:28, on the other hand, addresses the equality believers have in Christ, not their function as members of His body.

¹⁴² See 2 Sam. 23:3, Ps. 2:10-11, Eph. 6:9, Col. 4:1.

spouse.¹⁴³ If our dear Savior was not ashamed of being submissive to various authorities, divine and human, just and unjust, *for our sake*, should we not be encouraged to labor with cheerfulness as unto the Lord in our respective callings, giving due respect to whatever authority figures He has set over us?¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ How did Christ love His church? He “gave himself for it,” an obvious reference to His suffering and death. Why did He do this? “That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.” Are we husbands willing to sacrifice all in order to promote holiness in our wives, in order to prepare them for the heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus Christ?

¹⁴⁴ Consider Matt. 20:28 and 1 Cor. 15:24-28.

Chapter Seven

A Cultural Issue?

Among commentators who agree that 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 is about a literal, material headcovering, several argue that the practice is not binding today (being something limited to the culture of Paul's day) or that the symbol itself is too obscure to be effective and should therefore be replaced by a more culturally-relevant one. Let us consider both positions.

First, it is important to remember that the apostle places his instruction about headcoverings in the context of "ordinances," a word which, when used positively in the New Testament, always refers to a binding, authoritative command for God's church.¹⁴⁵ Later in this epistle, Paul uses a verb from the same root with reference to the Lord's Supper and Jesus' resurrection.¹⁴⁶

Some would counter that what the apostle is emphasizing is authority, not headcoverings. Had this been the case, he could have done so using far fewer words than he does. All his references to worship would also seem quite limiting, since principles of authority have far broader application than only in worship settings.¹⁴⁷

To pass over the importance of the symbol and its use is to miss much of what Paul is teaching in this passage. No one denies that

¹⁴⁵ Recall the discussion about this on pp. 8-9 of this study.

¹⁴⁶ In 1 Cor. 11:23 and 15:3, the verb form is translated "delivered." Details about this word family can be found on pp. 8-9 of this study.

¹⁴⁷ Consider Eph. 5:24, 33; 1 Tim. 2:11-12; or 1 Pet. 3:10 as examples of the brevity with which New Testament writers typically address authority issues involving men and women.

other important matters are involved in Paul's instruction here. But any candid reader cannot help but be impressed by the number, variety, and force of Paul's arguments in support not only of the principles of authority and submission, but also of the symbol of it. Aside from mentioning his authority as an apostle in verses 2-3, Paul appeals to God's ordained hierarchy (v. 3), the Corinthian's own sense of dishonor and shame (vv. 4-6), the image of God (vv. 7-9), the presence of angels (v. 10), the Corinthians' own consciences (v. 12), God's creation (vv. 14-15), and the witness of the churches (v. 16). Can anyone imagine Paul gathering together such varied and powerful arguments as these, simply to support a practice that had no relevance beyond his time and culture?

What about the second possibility – that *some* symbol of submission should be maintained, but one should be used that is more culturally appropriate?¹⁴⁸ Before answering this directly, consider how the same argument could be used with regard to the Lord's Supper or Baptism.

Even though bread and wine were common foods in Bible times, who in Corinth could have imagined these to be symbols of the Savior's crucified body or shed blood, unless, of course, they had prior instruction? Who without instruction would have known the significance of water in baptism? Yet when properly taught, Christians then and now can readily appreciate the beauty and appropriateness of these symbols. Since there has been no serious attempt throughout church history to "update" *those* symbols to something more "culturally appropriate," why, as long as proper instruction is given, should a substitute be sought for the headcovering?

¹⁴⁸ This is raised by Wallace, who after carefully exegeting the most critical verses of 1 Cor. 11 in *support* of a material headcovering, concludes, "For a woman to wear a head covering [today] would seem to be a distinctively humiliating experience. Many women – even biblically submissive wives – resist the notion precisely because they feel awkward and self-conscious." He goes on to suggest that we need to find a new, culturally-sensitive symbol of submission. In response, one can only wonder how it came to be that Christians are now supposedly permitted to neglect Biblical practices simply because they might be culturally awkward to obey.

To answer the substitution suggestion more directly, who in God's church would have the authority to make a substitution in the symbol of submission? How would unanimity and widespread recognition for the new symbol be achieved among Christians? Perhaps the problem is not so much the symbol, but rather society's reluctance to honor Biblical principles for men and women regarding authority and submission. As our culture increasingly becomes Biblically illiterate, the idea of submission to God's hierarchy of authority and a host of other Biblical principles will grow increasingly obscure, if not irrelevant. "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?"(Luke 18:8b).

Chapter Eight

On Christian Charity

Aside from the principles set forth in 1 Corinthians 11, there is another reason why women should adopt the symbolic headcovering in worship. That reason is Christian charity.

Paul concludes 1 Corinthians 8 by saying that even if he was free in his own conscience to eat meat that had been offered to idols, he would still not partake of it if his eating would cause a fellow Christian to stumble (vv. 9-11, 13). To not give up his liberty under such circumstances would be sin (v. 12).

A few chapters later, Paul devotes an entire section of this epistle to the subject of Christian charity. Among other things, chapter 13 teaches us that gifts, liberties, attainments, having, doing, and knowing are all of no value apart from love. Love is that which gives direction and purpose to all that we have and are. It is an outward-looking, others-centered gift. It is the greatest of gifts. It is the only gift that survives death. John writes that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). In Ephesians 5:1, we are called to follow God.¹⁴⁹

By contrast, the Corinthians had been focusing far too much on themselves and far too little on each other's welfare and edification. Paul knew that at the root of many of their problems was a lack of Christian charity. They forgot to an alarming degree that they were members of one body, the mystical body of Christ. They had almost lost all regard for the interdependent nature of the members

¹⁴⁹ The verb translated "follow" in Eph. 5:1 literally means "imitate."

of that body.¹⁵⁰ Let us take heed that we fall not into the same lovelessness.

We have seen earlier that when a Biblical command, prohibition, or principle is plain, Christian liberty is not an issue;¹⁵¹ Cheerful obedience is the required response. But even when we feel certain that we have true Christian liberty in a matter, let us carefully consider, as Paul did, how our exercise of that liberty may affect others.

In the same matter in which we claim liberty, a brother or sister in Christ, with equal conviction from Scripture, might believe we are being disobedient to God; thereby we cause him offense. Or our liberty might embolden a fellow-believer to follow our example, even against his conscience. Both situations, Paul says, should be avoided. Even if we do not agree with a brother's interpretation of Scripture or share his personal conviction, giving up our liberty to promote unity is entirely appropriate and pleasing to God, under most circumstances. "Let all your things be done with charity."¹⁵²

The principle of curtailing one's liberty for the sake of the weaker brother can be abused, however. We are not required to accommodate ourselves to everyone's *preferences*. Though an offended brother should not be required to convince us of his particular interpretation of Scripture in a disputed matter, he should at least be able to explain, using God's Word, the basis for his being offended. Under no circumstances, however, should we accommodate ourselves to another's convictions if doing so would violate our own conscience before God, adversely impacting our personal relationship with Him (1 Cor. 8:7, 10, 11).

¹⁵⁰ This interdependency is beautifully expressed in Eph. 4:16.

¹⁵¹ See p. 38 par. 1 in this work.

¹⁵² In Eph. 4:3, Paul writes that we should endeavor "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." How delightful to forgo our personal liberty, if by doing so we may contribute in some small way to the blessings of peace and unity.

It is the conviction of the author, and hopefully now of you the candid reader, that a woman's use of the symbolic headcovering during worship is not a matter of Christian liberty. But even if you are not convinced that this is the teaching of Scripture, consider with love your fellow Christians who are. Before a woman worships God in public with an uncovered head, let her ask herself two questions. Would wearing the headcovering interfere with my relationship with God? Might not wearing it offend a brother or sister in Christ?

Chapter Nine

Summary of Principles and Conclusions

This final chapter is purposely brief. It is provided for quick reference and for the benefit of those who do not care to sift through the more detailed material in the other chapters. Except for the paragraph about church history at the end, each statement has a footnote directing the reader to the places in this study where that statement is discussed in more detail.

1. Understanding the context and structure of First Corinthians is important for the proper interpretation of chapter 11 verses 1-16.¹⁵³
2. The instruction Paul gives in these verses is an “ordinance...delivered” to God’s church. As such, it is authoritative. Its binding character is neither outdated nor dependent on culture.¹⁵⁴
3. The headcovering referred to in verses 4-7, 10, and 13 is a literal, material one. It is not the woman’s hair, though God *has* given her long hair to be a natural covering and her glory.¹⁵⁵
4. The headcovering is a symbol of submission to God-ordained authority.¹⁵⁶
5. A woman ought to wear this material covering at least wherever and whenever she is in the presence of a man offering prayer on

¹⁵³ See pp. 3-5 and 13-16.

¹⁵⁴ See pp. 7-9; p. 34, par. 1; and p. 69, par. 2.

¹⁵⁵ See pp. 31-33; p. 35, n. 89; and chap. 5, pp. 55-63.

¹⁵⁶ See p. 14, par. 3; pp. 23-25; p. 26, par. 3; p. 30, par. 2; pp. 31-33; p. 41 par. 4; p. 47, par. 1; p. 57; p. 58, par. 3; p. 61, par. 2 through p. 62, par. 2; chap. 6, pp. 65-68; and p. 69, par. 4.

behalf of others in a public setting.¹⁵⁷

6. Though specific detail as to the material design of the headcovering is not given in Scripture, it should nevertheless reflect what it symbolizes – a woman’s cheerful submission to God-ordained authority figures in her life. Functionally, it should cover the woman’s head, including her hair.¹⁵⁸

A Note on Church History

This study purposely omitted an attempt to evaluate the headcovering issue from the perspective of church history. This omission is not intended to slight the glorious record of God’s care for His church throughout the centuries. We do maintain, however, that a Christian’s faith and practice must ultimately rest upon the foundation of Scripture. Available historical material appears very inconclusive. Nevertheless, bibliographical references are noted below and in the bibliography for those readers wishing to consult historical sources.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ See p. 51, par. 4 through p. 53; p. 58, par. 3; p. 61, par. 2; and p. 63.

¹⁵⁸ As to appearance of the covering, see p. 62. As to the symbolism, see references for n. 158 above.

¹⁵⁹ One of the better treatments of church history compiled *against* the continued use of the headcovering is the report issued by the RPNA in the summer of 2001. An abundance of historical material *supporting* the covering’s continued use today can be found in Sanseri’s work. Bibliographical information for both can be found on p. 83 of this report.

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Please Note:

Additional sources of information can be provided by the author upon request.