



Propriety in Public Worship (1 Cor. 11:2-16)

Paul begins a section now which will address order within the church. A number of problems were destroying the oneness Christians should have in Christ. In verse 2 Paul complements the Corinthian church. In the midst of rebuke and instruction Paul pauses to say, ***“I commend you...”*** His commendation was based on the fact that they remembered him and the traditions he had taught them.

The word “traditions” or “teachings” is used here to signify those things taught and passed on to the Corinthians by Paul that they ought to follow. From this verse of commendation, he quickly turns to the topic of head coverings. These verses have been controversial in the church and some have even brought conflict between men and women. To some in today’s world the biblical relationship between men and women has been deemed condescending and inappropriate.

These verses and others have been used to criticise the Apostle Paul as being biased or anti-female. In this and all his New Testament letters we must understand that Paul is not providing a personal opinion, but is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These are in fact the very Words of God.

I. Defining the Word “Head”

To understand 1 Cor. 11, it is important that we are able to define the Greek word *“kephale”* which is translated as “head.”

1. The most common meaning of the word “head” is the literal physical part of person that sits upon his shoulders.
2. Second, and more important for our discussion, is the word’s figurative or metaphorical use in the New Testament. It is obvious from a reading of 1 Cor. 11:3 that the word can be used metaphorically.
 - A. There are those who take what we might call “feminist” views. The most radical of these views do not believe the Bible is authoritative in any way. Those who espouse, what Cottrell calls, Biblical Feminism believe in the authority of the Bible, but understand the Bible to teach an egalitarian view of women. The egalitarian view is that there is complete equality between men and women and therefore there can be no differentiation in roles in the church. For those who hold this view “head” means source and not authority. Those who hold these views sometimes disregard those Scriptures which do not agree with their views while others reinterpret Paul’s teachings to their benefit.¹
 - B. The word “head” or *kephale* is used nine times in verses 2-16. When used metaphorically, the word should be understood to mean “leader.” or “authority.”² This view seems to best fit the Scriptural context.

¹ Oester, Richard E., Jr. *The College Press NIV Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1995. pp. 255-259.

² Ibid.

II. The Doctrine of Headship

Headship does not mean superiority. In 11:3, God is said to be the head of Christ, yet we know them to be equal in power, knowledge, honour, and glory. Jesus told Philip in **John 14:9**, “... *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father...*” and the Hebrew writer says of Christ in **Hebrews 1:3**, he is “*the exact imprint of his nature...*” Christ was not inferior to the Father and women are not inferior to men. Headship does not mean superiority.



Headship does mean leadership. When Jesus walked upon this earth He voluntarily placed himself in subjection to His father. Jesus prayed to the Father and fulfilled the will of his Father. Christ willingly sacrificed himself on the cross in obedience to the Father. In the home, husbands are to lovingly lead their wives and in the church men are to serve in the positions of leadership.

1. What makes the egalitarian view so popular in the church today?

III. The Setting of 1 Cor. 11:2-16

Most have understood 1 Cor. 11:2-16 to be instruction for corporate public worship assemblies. Ferguson however disagrees saying that in verse 17 we have a transition moving from commendation to rebuke and the setting seems to change when Paul writes “when you come together.” Verses 2-16 are all part of a commendation, but some according to verse 16 may have been critical of those who kept the traditions.³

Though these verses are used by some as support for allowing women to pray, prophecy, preach, or teach in the assembly, it is quite possible what was going on was not in the assembly. It is important to remember that no Scripture will violate another Scripture and in 1 Cor. 14:33-34 Paul clearly says that women are not permitted to speak in the assembly.

In verses 2-16, then Paul could be speaking of any time of praying or prophesying whether public or private. Cottrell takes the praying and prophesying of verses 4-5 to include miraculous gifts of prophecy and tongues (with tongues being a kind of prayer.)⁴

We also note the word translated as “practice” in the ESV and NIV is often translated as “custom.” This leads us to believe that Paul is talking about a custom among the Corinthians and that the head coverings he discusses are not for all Christians in all ages.

2. How far can a Christian go to accommodate the culture around him?

IV. Teachings on Head Coverings

Headship means that men submit to God. The head of every man is Christ so men voluntarily submit to God. Part of this submission was that a man will not worship with his head uncovered. For a man to cover the head in first century Corinth showed him to be in subjection to another. Slaves wore head

³Ferguson, Everett. *The Church of Christ: Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996. p. 342.

⁴Cottrell, Jack. *Headship, Submission, and the Bible: Gender Roles in the Home*. Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2008.

coverings and free men when bare headed. If a man covered his head it signified his loyalty was to a human rather than to Christ.⁵ Other commentators believe that there are other reasons why Paul taught a man should not have his head covered such as the fact that the Jews covered their heads in worship and that it was a current style of women and not men.



James Coffman makes an interesting case that the entire section on head coverings does not refer to a specific piece of cloth that one placed on their head, but to hair. The Greek literally says “having something down from his head” and the something is neither stated or implied. This he says fits contextually with verse 14 when Paul says that a man should not have long hair.⁶ We may never know exactly the first century dress and hair styles perfectly enough to be dogmatic about our understanding.

In verse 6, Paul turns his attention to wives. In this case a wife was to pray or prophesy with her head covered. It was the custom of first century Greek women to cover their heads in public as a sign of their femininity and submission. To go out in public without a head covered signified that she might be an immoral woman. This would bring dishonour to her head (that is her husband). If a woman does not wear a head covering, she might as well go out with all her hair cut off. While there is no biblical teaching against women shaving their heads, in first century Corinth this could indicate that a woman was mourning, a slave, or immoral.⁷

3. Do these verses teach anything about how Christian men and women should dress today?

The word glory (vs. 7) originally meant how a person was thought of by others; it is the opposite of shame. In the New Testament the word is primarily used for God and means not just how he is thought of by others, but the fact that he has inherent worth and majesty. Still the older idea is sometimes used and is in mind here. When a man prophesied with his head uncovered brought glory to God, his head while a woman who covered her head brought glory to her husband, her head.⁸

Christians need to act within their culture in such a way to bring glory to God. A man who disregards local customs does not honour God and a woman who brings shame to her husband has dishonoured her husband and her God.

4. Why does it matter what people in the world think of Christians?

5. How would a wife who brought glory to her husband, bring glory to God?

The relationship of man to the Creation is another reason for Paul’s teaching. Verses 8 and 9 are a reference to Genesis 2:22-23 where the woman is created from the rib of man. Man came first in the Creation order and was made from the dust of the earth by God. Woman was created second, and was created out of the man and for the man. The Creation order itself testifies that the husband is the head of the wife and is to lead in the home and in the church. This is a part of God’s original plan.

⁵Smith, James E. *Teacher’s Commentary: The Encounter Epistles 1 & 2 Corinthians*. Lulu, 2010. p. 177.

⁶Coffman, James Burton. *“Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament”*. <<http://www.studylight.org/com/bcc/view.cgi?book=1co&chapter=011>>. Abilene Christian University Press, Abilene, Texas, USA. 1983-1999.

⁷Ibid. p. 178

⁸Cottrell. Ibid. p. 239-246.

6. What significance is there to the fact that man and woman are both created in the image of God?

Verse 10 says that the wife should have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. The head covering shows the wife to be under the authority of her husband. To disregard the head covering in that culture would have dishonoured her husband and showed his lack of leadership in the home. There are many ideas about what Paul means when he mentions the angels. One of the most reasonable explanations is that Paul is referring to those angels who rebelled against God and were cast into hell (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). They serve as an example to all who refuse to follow those in authority. The woman who wears a head covering shows herself to be in subjection to her husband.

V. The Male-Female Relationship

All should understand that men are not superior to women. Paul states in verse 11 that men and women are not independent of each other. Every person on the earth is here through procreation that was not possible without both man and woman. Whereas the first woman may have come out of man, all subsequent men have been born from a woman.



Beyond that, Paul uses the phrase *“in the Lord”* in verse 11 showing that man and woman are in equal need of salvation and equally entitled to share in salvation. While men and women are dependent upon each other both are dependent upon God.

VI. Concluding Statements on the Subject of Head Coverings

7. What is meant by the phrase “judge for yourselves” in verse 13?

Paul’s concluding remarks shows that men and women are to act like men and women within their culture. Women wore long hair while men did not. It would be wrong for either to dress like the opposite sex. In the first century in men wore short hair styles and it was not considered masculine to wear long hair. Conversely long hair was considered feminine and for a woman to have short hair was thought to be manly. Men and women need to act like men and women within their culture.

8. How is this teaching applicable today?

9. What is Paul’s teaching in verse 16?