
Struggling with Cultural Issues

1 Corinthians 11:2-17¹⁷

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What should we do when we struggle with a text?

The text is obscure to us.

We are not certain of the cultural issues involved.

We do not know all church issues involved.

The text is not directly to us. We do not struggle with what appears to be the problem. No wife at the Chapel has recently shaved her head and demanded the right to lead in public prayer or to prophesy because she is equal to her husband and the elders.

The solution to the issue in the text has divided the church, Bible students and commentators since its writing.

I want to take a little different approach to expositing this text. Normally we read through the text and outline as we go. Tonight, I think it would be helpful to carry on a dialog with the text.

There is a lot of discussion about the culture behind the text. A lot of it is assumed. Some of it is helpful from history and archeology. But since those cultural elements are not clearly referred to in this text as they were in chapter 10, we need to be very careful *basing our exposition on them*. So we will not do that. I will refer to the culture as a possibility, but I am going to assume that what the Spirit wanted us to understand Paul wrote understandably.

We do know several things culturally about the Roman and Jewish world of that day.

Women, both Jewish and Roman, often, but not always, wore a shawl or hood that could be pulled up over their heads. We have depictions of women in public having nothing on their heads and many with something on their heads. So, there was no cultural requirement for women to be covered. What we see in the Middle East since the 800's is the effect of Islamic decree not Roman culture, (a mistake an amazing number of commentators make.)

Jewish men always had their head covered when praying or teaching in the synagogue. This is still true today in Orthodox Judaism. So this text actually reverses the common synagogue practice.

Many of the pagan religions had temple priestesses who led the worship of the pagan idols. They led in what were called the "ecstasies" and the "prophecies". In some of

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these false religions, the priestesses who did this had their heads shaved as a public indication of their status.

We have an interesting symmetry between 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. In chapter 10 the issue was about Christians participating in the pagan temples' practices. In chapter 11 the issue seems to be about the practices of the pagan temples being brought into the Christian worship.

Engaging the Text

Well, what does this text actually say?

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

³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵ but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶ For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head.

⁷ For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; ¹² for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

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

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

A Local Issue

Notice first the bookends, the beginning and the end of the text:

² Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. ³ But I want you to understand...

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

So Paul is commending them for following the teachings he gave them (v. 2). But, they do need to understand something (v. 3) that seems to have gone wrong. This issue did not follow the teachings, the traditions he had given them (v. 3-15). So, they have to solve the issue they are struggling with, but we all have to understand *Paul's team did not practice what they were struggling with nor do any of the other churches*. What does this mean? I believe that this was a **local issue** to the church at Corinth. They had a problem that deviated from Paul's teaching, Paul's general practice and what the rest of the churches did.

However the issue cannot simply be dismissed as not important. It was all wrapped up with the leadership and division issues in the church. What was happening in their public worship was another symptom of the underlying problems in the church with its leadership. They have to address the issue by properly handling the Scriptures, their situation and the culture around them

A Possible Interaction

Paul engages them from the Scriptures. He seems to be answering statements from them and misuses of Scripture by them. This is more difficult to discern here but it has been helpful to me to highlight where Paul writes something and then negates it with "but" or "nevertheless". It is my considered opinion that verses 6 and 10 are like this.

Verse 6:

[Corinthians] ⁶ For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short.

[Paul] **But** since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head.

Verse 10-11:

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

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

The best way to understand these verses is to see the interaction between the leadership at Corinth and Paul. In verses 6 there is a childish overreaction to the problem which Paul counters with a measured call for submission. In verse 10 there seems to be the insistence that the women wear a head covering because of the angels. It is possible that the word translated "angels" could be translated "messengers". Messengers were authorized representatives from one church who was visiting another church in some formal capacity. We simply do not know which it is here. If they were concerned about angels, then it is likely that they were referring to Genesis 6. If they were referring to messengers, then they were concerned about how the church's reputation among other churches. Given the concluding statement by Paul, I believe this is the most likely understanding.

A Problematic Ignorance

Finally, let me ask, “What is the covering?” Are we talking about a hat? A hood? A shawl? A full body cloak? Is the kind of covering worn by a man different from that worn by a woman? From the text itself, we have no answer. The word simply something “hanging down from the head.” Therefore Paul could see hair as functioning as a covering.

A Defiant Insurrection (v. 3-6)

³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵ but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶ For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head.

So, a man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, that is, Christ. A wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, that is, her husband. Now there are several things to note from this text.

The covering was required of a wife, not just any woman. It was wives who were defying their husband’s authority and possibly the authority of the church.

The issue was taking place only in the public gatherings of the church. This was not just any Christian wife in public; it was when Christians were gathered. How do we know that? Because of what is next.

The covering was required *only* when a wife was praying or prophesying in the public gathering of the church at Corinth. In other words, these women were leading in public prayer and prophesying in a way that was openly defying the authority placed over them. Please note the language carefully. What was being required was being required **ONLY** when a **WIFE** was **PRAYING OR PROPHESYING**.

Some wives were shaving their heads and insisting on their equal right to lead in the public ministries of praying and prophesying. They were shaving their heads in open disregard for authority. Verse 10 reinforces this as a primary concern.

Why is this an issue? It is possible (but not certain) that these wives were acting like the temple priestesses. They had shaved their heads. They were asserting their equality and independence of their husband’s authority, at least in the church. They were acting in defiance of the leadership’s authority, possibly who was forbidding them to lead in prayer and prophecy because of their rebellious attitudes. The leadership seemed to resorting to desperate claims and misuse of Scripture to reign the problem in. the irony here is that this very same leadership had rejected Paul’s apostolic authority.

But, is just wearing or not wearing something on the head the real issue? No. In verse 3 Paul is more concerned about the issue of authority and submission. Christ is the head or authority over men. A husband is the head or authority over his own wife. God is the head over Christ. Christ has divine and ultimate authority over man. God (the Father) has role and relational authority over Christ. A husband has role and relational authority over his wife. Paul is showing the difference between Christ's intrinsic and ultimate authority over people and the role and relational authority of a husband.

This issue is also what contributed to the problems we will see in 1 Corinthians 14. The public gathering of the church was degenerating into chaos over several issues. This was one of them.

A Correcting Instruction

(v. 7-12)

⁷ For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; ¹² for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

Paul then takes global truths and applies them to their local situation. Some would make a case that since Paul is using creation, marriage order, global principles, then the issue is therefore global. I would agree and disagree. I agree that people submitting to leadership in the home and church is a global problem. I disagree that wearing covering on the head is a global expression of that heart issue.

In their situation, covering the head and length of hair were authority and submission issues. So a man who was leading in prayer or prophesying should not have his head covered because he is reflecting his God-given authority in the church. The image of God in man and the order of creation argue for a Biblical view of men's role in the church and headship in the home.

I have already pointed out that I believe verse 10 is a something the Corinthians wrote or said. Paul does not interact with their misuse of Genesis 6. He interacts with their understanding of the difference between Christian equality and marriage subordination. In the Lord there is not radical independence as though the gender differences don't matter. There is equality in the Lord. But there is not independence. There is essential, personal and martial interdependence. Fundamentally men and women are one in Christ. But just as there is authority and subordination in the Godhead, so there is authority in the church and in the home. So anyone who wants to lead in the public worship of the church in praying and prophesying does so in submission to the leadership. A wife who is in open defiance to her husband or to the church leadership is disqualified.

Therefore, in Corinth, wearing a covering was needed since they had shaved their heads. Covering their heads would have shown their repentance and willingness to submit to their husbands and the leadership. But ultimately, the authority they were to submit to was God. To rebel against those who God had placed as head (even when they were not exercising that authority correctly) was to rebel against the Word and authority of God. The true test of submission is not when those who are over us are telling us to do what we want. The true test of whether we are in submission or not is when the authority tells you do something you don't want to do.

That was part of the problem here. The church had established a rule. That rule was grounded in the intersection of the Scriptures and the culture. So no one who openly defied authority by the men covering their head or the wives by shaving their heads were allowed to lead in prayer or prophesy. If they had done so but were willing to repent and submit, then both would follow the head-covering rule.

A Challenging Imperative

(v. 13-15)

So, Paul throws one more wisdom idea into the mix. What role does the length of hair play in all this?

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

They need to make a decision. It needs to be a carefully thought through decision about the appropriateness of what they are doing. But they need to think through one more thing. The leaders need to think about their "rule". In fact, God has given a natural covering. God has given a lady her hair as a visible means of her submission. To shave her head, at least in Corinth, was clearly and open defiance. But if they would allow their hair to grow out *to show they were acknowledging their place*, then that should be enough.

The question here really is not so much how long is long. Paul does seem to highlighting the glory of long hair. It is arrayed around her as a beautiful covering. But if her heart is wrong, then just the length of her hair does not qualify her.

A Concluding Insight

(v. 16)

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

So, there should not be contention in the church about this issue. For them, the church had established a practice. IT had good grounds in Scripture. It was reasonable given the setting and situation. It may have been over pushed by domineering leaders. But no one should be arguing about it.

However, this practice of wearing a covering was not the practice Paul taught. No other church had this issue. And even if you say the “practice” is not allowing the hair to be the covering, the effect for us is the same.

Reflect and Respond

First, since the expression of heart submission is a wisdom issue, if you are convicted to wear a head covering as a lady, please feel free to do so. We will love you, accept you and encourage you to faithful keeping of your conscience.

So, what is the take aways from this text?

In order to be qualified to lead in the public acts of worship (prayer and prophesying) men and wives are to be in submission to those who are head over them.

When we are wrestling through wisdom issues, we still must bring the Scriptures to bear on our decisions. Even local wisdom issues require global Biblical principles.

Equality in the body does not override authority and submission in the body. There is both in the Trinity. There is both in the church. There is both in the home.

Church leaders have the responsibility to establish the practice of the church in corporate gatherings. And, we must be careful and wise so that God is pleased with us.

There is no mandate for all churches to carry out the Corinthian practice. In some places it may be wise. But we must always be aware that our heart attitudes are much more important than some external practice. However, open defiance of an established church practice is sinful and disqualifying.

What we do in the corporate gatherings of the church matters. ! Corinthians 11-14 address a whole range of issues. May God grant that our own gathering will be pleasing to Him as learn from His Word.

