

The Head

Mike Thompson

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Today's passage has been labeled many things: unhelpful, patriarchal, irrelevant to today's world, hurtful.

Craig Blomberg writes, "This passage is probably the most complex, controversial, and opaque of any text of comparable length in the New Testament."

In many churches that follow a calendar year, this text is simply skipped. But all Scripture is God-breathed, and useful for teaching in righteousness. And I believe that we need to hear from this passage today.

Read I Corinthians 11:2-16.

ESV **1 Corinthians 11:2**

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

Paul begins with praise. He commends the Corinthians. They have embraced the "traditions". And by traditions he means those doctrines he has taught them concerning the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One particular truth of the Gospel is that both men and women approach God in the same way, through faith in Jesus Christ. They are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:24-28 ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave¹ nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

"There is neither male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

The Resurrection changes everything for Paul. In the New Heavens and New Earth there will no longer be human marriages. The entire Church will be the Bride of Jesus Christ. So, if that is where we are headed, then maybe we should eliminate all distinctions now?

The gifts of the Holy Spirit were being poured out on men and women alike. Women spoke in tongues. Women were given the gift of prophecy. Just like men. This is good news. It is to be celebrated by men and women alike. Paul is happy that the Corinthians embraced this truth. He is happy that they did not reject this. So, he praises them. He

commends them for being good students. But these wonderful truths did not change the fact that as long as we still live in our earthly bodies, we are tied to the order that God has established for this creation.

At creation, God made men and women different. And He made them with distinct purposes. And those differences and purposes are not annulled by the Gospel.

And God placed the man in authority over the woman. The wonderful truth that we are all one in Christ Jesus needs to be balanced with the truth of the distinctions between men and women that God has ordained at creation.

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.

Paul speaks of headship. His point is to establish who is in the position of authority. The head over every man is Christ. The head over a wife is the husband. Or, more literally, the head of the woman is the man. Men are placed by God in the position of authority. Within the Trinity, the Father is in authority over the Son.

Authority has been given to men by God in the creation of marriage with Adam and Eve. Men, this does not mean that you have authority to be cruel or to dominate. You are called to serve. Jesus makes that very clear.

Ladies, Jesus is your head as well. But that is part of the initial truth that they already accepted. Remember, Paul is explaining the balancing truth.

Paul's point: There is an order of authority that God has established for this world. God - Christ - man - woman.

There is a hierarchy of authority built into the creation. The hierarchy of the man and woman may change in the New Heavens and New Earth. But for now it still exists and we should embrace it.

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-
 it is the same as if her head were shaven.

When Paul places prayer with prophesying he is most likely referring to leading the congregation in prayer. And leading the congregation in prayer, like prophesying, were activities that were traditionally open only to men. But now, with the outpouring of the Spirit, it was obvious that God wanted women to be involved in these activities in the worship service.

That is important because when we get to chapter 14 it will help us to rightly interpret Paul's words there:

1 Corinthians 14:34 ³⁴ the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.

Paul's words in chapter 14 cannot possibly mean complete silence because he allows for both praying and prophesying here in chapter 11. We will wait until chapter 14 to discuss in detail what exactly was the gift of prophesy and whether it continues today. But there is no question that it existed as Paul was writing and that women possessed it and that they exercised this gift during the worship service.

Paul is not trying to stop this from happening. He is simply arguing that in the exercise of this gift of the Holy Spirit that it be done while acknowledging positions of authority.

To not make clear these positions of authority is to bring shame upon one's head. For a man to act like he is under the authority of the woman is to bring shame on his head. And for the woman to act like she is not under the authority of man is to bring shame upon his head.

⁶ For if a wife (woman) will not cover her head, (when she is praying or prophesying)
then she should cut her hair short. (pretend to be a man)
But
since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head,
let her cover her head.

Paul wants women, while they are doing actions that might imply authority, to make clear, using an outward symbol, that they are continuing to respect authority.

To perform such actions without acknowledging the authority of men is shameful. It would be like having your head shaved.

But since it is shameful to have you head shaved, don't pray or prophesy without making it clear to everyone that you are respecting God-ordained roles of authority.

There is nothing immoral about having short hair. But the shaving of the hair is one way to bring shame upon a woman. In occupied Europe during WWII some women became the mistresses to the German officers. After the liberation of Europe by the Allies, the citizens rounded up these women and shaved their heads as a means of disgracing them.

Paul's point is clear. Exercising God-given gifts does not give you the right to ignore God-given authorities.

⁷ For a man ought not to cover his head,

It is just as wrong for a man to abdicate his role of authority as it is for a woman to usurp it. We may not understand the covering of the head as a symbol of authority, but we must embrace

the principle of authority itself. Men have been given authority. Women are under the authority of men.

God ordained this at creation.

since he is the
image
and
glory
of God,
but
woman is the
glory
of man.

This verse is incredibly profound.

Both man and woman are made in the image of God.

ESV **Genesis 1:27** So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

When it comes to bearing the image and likeness of God, both men and women do so.

In fact, to limit God's character to maleness is not accurate.

There are aspects of God's being that are more clearly displayed in feminine qualities.

We should embrace this as believers. Even while we continue to hold onto the truth that we are to call upon God as Father, rather than mother. But this has more to do with our relationship to God as our authority than it does to God's ability to tenderly care for us. The Bible is not afraid to describe God in terms of a mother hen protecting her young, spreading her pinions over them.

But while both men and women reflect the image of God, it is man who is the glory of God.

The woman was not made for the glory of God, not directly. That may sound sexist. But let me explain. Who is the one person in all the world who perfectly displays the glory of God? Jesus Christ, the man.

Heb. 1:3 He (Jesus) is the radiance of the glory of God

There is nothing of the glory of God that is missing in Jesus. He has it all.

So, it must be man who is the image and glory of God.

In Jesus, a human being, the brightness and majesty of God is on full display.

And every man who worships in Jesus name, must embrace that, as a man, he in some small way reflects that glory as well. But how is it that women are the glory of man?

Apart from women, men cannot be fully who we were intended to be. Not just in marriage, but in all of life, men need women in order to be full and complete. Put a bunch of men together apart from women and it is not pretty. Women help men reflect the glory of God.

The problem with extreme feminism is that it wants to find in femininity, apart from man, glory.

But men can get things twisted as well. Because, we can hear from this that it is man who displays the glory of God, apart from woman. When the truth is that manhood is only completed when it is joined with true femininity.

This is what it means that woman is for the glory of man. When God designed the woman, he did so to complete the man.

- 8 For man was not made from woman,
 but
 woman from man.
- 9 Neither was man created for woman,
 but
 woman for man.

The woman was made FROM the man.

The woman was made FOR the man.

These two statements are woven together. You can hardly think of the one without thinking of the other.

God had created Adam a whole being. But he was alone. There was no one with whom to live in fellowship. There was no one who could fulfill Adam's need for companionship.

So, God determines to make another human being who will be perfectly suitable to become the helper to the man.

There is no way that we can get around the profound impact that this has on God's purpose for women and their identity. And if ever truth is ridge line, it is as this point.

Women fulfill their God-given purpose by being women, and so completing who God designed mankind to be.

The woman and the man together work to fulfill God's purpose for mankind. It is good and right for a woman to desire to take dominion over this world. A woman can and should seek God's will for her life. What she should not do is seek that will "independently of man." Working this out in every detail gets messy, and complicated. How exactly the woman will be a helper in

every context takes wisdom. I certainly do not have all the answers. But there is something about “helper” that is built into the heart of every woman, even if they never get married.

And men need to be challenged by this as well. If we are ever to fulfill our God-given purpose in this life, we must accept that we cannot do so apart from the help of women. We need what women bring to the table. We need their perspective. We need their skills. We need all that they are as human beings. It is not just in the home that men need women. It is in all of life.

The woman is not just made “for” man. She is made so that together with the man, they might fulfill God’s purposes for man in this world. Women were not made to fulfill one need or another of man. Women were created to complete man in all of his being.

But in fulfilling their role of completing men, women are not to reject the authority of men.

The order of authority in this life of men and women is non-negotiable. It is not an issue of culture. It is an issue of creation.

But I will admit that to embrace authority over you is scary.

People abuse authority all the time.

It is certainly right to criticize those abuses, but we must be careful to not undermine the principle itself.

Throughout the book of I Corinthians, Paul encourages the proper use of authority and the willing submission to those authorities.

Most of us struggle with authority. But most of us are willing to acknowledge that learning submission to legitimate authorities is valuable.

Studying this passage challenges me to embrace authority and not cast it off.

There is a peace that occurs when we do this.

Up to this point, I have been mostly talking about the principles. But Paul does more than talk about principles. He also talks about the external symbols.

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

Whatever the symbol may be, Paul is arguing that the outward symbol is important.

He could have said, “That is why a wife ought to strive to submit to her husband. Or, that is why a woman ought to respect the leadership of men.”

But instead, he writes, “That is why a wife (woman) ought to have a symbol of authority on her head.

The function of the symbol is to make clear that the woman embraces the authority of men over her, even while she is engaging in an activity that might appear otherwise.

As a college student, I loved the teaching of Bob and Marilyn Taylor. They were the Sunday School teachers in our church. Sometimes Bob would teach the class. Sometimes they would sort of co-teach. But sometimes Marilyn would teach. But she would always make clear at the outset, "I am under the authority of Bob as my husband, and the pastor of the Church." I respected that. And, to be honest, Marilyn was the more gifted teacher.

Because of the angels. What does Paul mean by this?

Some have interpreted this as saying that the angels are watching. This may be the case. Angels are serving believers. They are interested in the saints. And angels are particularly aware of the sin of their fellow "fallen – angels."

Jude 1:6 ⁶ And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day -

Paul uses angels as an example of those who were not content to remain within their God-given order of authority. For Christians, it is a matter of belief. Will we accept the order of authority that God has put in place? Or will we cast it off?

So, for whatever reason, God thinks that it is not only important to respect authority from the heart, but also to have a symbol of that authority as well.

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.

God has interwoven men and women in this world such that we are mutually dependent upon one another. We cannot do without one another.

The woman is not independent of the man.

And the man is not independent of the woman.

The woman may have originally been taken out of man, but ever since then, the man comes from the woman.

God does not want fear and distrust between men and women. Sin is the cause of that. God desires that men and women respect one another and embrace one another.

Accepting the principle of authority does not have to be demeaning to women. Nor should men use this principle to think of themselves as better than women. The truth is that we need one another. We cannot do this alone. God has designed us in such a way that we need one another.

Now Paul returns to his point, the conclusion of the matter.

13 Judge for yourselves:
is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?

CSB **1 Corinthians 11:13** Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

Paul is not trying to be heavy handed with the Corinthians. He will be stronger in the next section dealing with Communion. Here Paul has taught the truth. But he has not removed the necessity of their thinking for themselves. It is not that they can simply decide for themselves what is right. But, they have to use their own powers of reason. They have to be persuaded in their own hearts. Paul wants them to reason it through.

He returns for the third time to the question:
Is it proper for a woman to pray (in public worship) or prophesy with her head uncovered (ie. without some symbol of authority)?

This is the point of this passage. It doesn't feel in my heart like it should be a huge deal. But this is what Paul is teaching. And God has placed this passage in the Scripture in His perfect wisdom. It is not only the inner attitude that matters. To some degree, it is also the outward appearance.

But what we have not really dealt with yet is what exactly does Paul intend by "covering"? There are only really two possibilities. The first is some sort of external hat or shawl. It is something that is placed on the head that makes clear that the woman is acknowledging the authority of men.

The other possibility is that Paul views the woman's hair as the covering. While I respect those argue for some form of hat, I am satisfied that hair that is longer than men also does justice to the text.

In verse 4, the phrase head covered, literally reads "having down the head". Nowhere in the passage is does Paul use the noun for covering except in v. 15 where he is specifically speaking of the lady's hair "as a covering."

And the verb that Paul uses for “uncovered” throughout the passage has parallels in the OT LXX that refer to a woman’s hair being “unbound and disheveled.” (Num. 5:18 and Lev. 13:45)

There is no command in the OT for Jewish women to wear a covering of any sort during worship. It is the exercising of the gifts of the Spirit by women in worship that create the need to demonstrate respect of authority.

It sounds rather simple, but a woman should make clear through her appearance (ie. hair length) that she is not trying to usurp the authority of man.

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

NIV 1 Corinthians 11:16 If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice-- nor do the churches of God.

If there is a verse that displays how very changed is the context of the early church from the modern church it is this one. Paul is basically saying, “This is my position and the position of all of the other churches throughout the Greco-Roman world. You Corinthians are the exception on this.”

But as I stand here today, the exact opposite is the case. Christians would be hard pressed to find a church that thinks that having a symbol of authority is important at all. Only in such antiquated churches as the Amish or the Mennonites do hats exist. (I mean no disrespect to them.)

Honestly, I am not exactly sure how to apply the specifics when it comes to hair. I am certainly not ready to be the hair police. The dangers of this seem awful to me. I believe that we should all walk away from this text with a great deal of humility. And we should resist the tendency to judge one another on the details.

Which is why I want to end with applications that I have a good deal more certainty:

1. We all need to respect the authorities that God has put in place.
2. We should want to make clear outwardly that we respect authority.
3. Men, generally speaking, are given by God, the position of authority. Women should not fight against this, but accept this by honoring men and helping them to fulfill the general purpose for mankind – glorifying God.
4. Men should want to be men. And women should want to be women.
5. God has made men and women mutually dependent upon one another.
6. With the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, God makes very clear that He wants women to play a vital role in the Church, and its worship.

We will discuss this more when we get to chapter 14. But while this passage continues to affirm the authority of men, it also affirms that God wants women to have a voice in the Church.

Paul did not want the women to have a symbol of authority in place to limit their activity in the church. He wanted it to make standing on the ridge line easier: Affirming male headship while encouraging women in their full participation in the life of the Church.

For the Church to be all that she is designed to be, we need both men and women using their giftedness and serving in all sorts of ways.

The Gospel

God setting right what was messed up by sin.

God's original design was for men and women to function in harmony with one another, together fulfilling God's purpose for mankind.

In the Gospel, Jesus is the perfect man. He is what manhood should be.

By his death, he pays the penalty for every wrong that you have ever committed or will commit. When you acknowledge your own rebellion to his authority and trust in his free mercy, he is able to cleanse you from all of your sin.

But the Gospel does not end with forgiveness. It is also a message of restoration. He wants to fix us as individuals, by empowering us to overcome personal sins.

But he also is working to restore the harmony between men and women. This does not mean removing the distinctions between men and women. It means that the Gospel is working to restore men to be true men and women to be true women.

Amen.