

Sermon 35: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16: Male Headship and Head Coverings

OUTLINE

Male headship asserted
Male headship applied
Male headship argued

INTRODUCTION

Today we come to one of the most offensive but also one of the most needed sections of 1 Corinthians for the 21st century. We live at a time where gender and sex have been divided; where gender is seen as a social construct; where an endless amount of self-defined genders are the new normal. We live in a day that cannot answer the question 'What is a woman?' We live in a day that has rejected all of God's laws including the natural laws written into our bodies, rejecting the basic binary of male and female. The feminist revolution; the homosexual revolution; and the transgender revolution have all rejected God's ways for men and women and have brought about some of the most destructive social changes that have ever been experienced. Gender dysphoria; the sexualization of children; the mutilation of children; the murdering of unborn children; the destruction of the family; the emasculating of men; denying women their God given uniqueness and forcing them into roles and responsibilities that God has not given to them. The amount of lies, confusion, damage, sin, and denial of God that has happened through these things is incalculable. Add to this that to misgender someone is a hate crime and a form of violence; that people are ready to be triggered by any verbal misstep and bring the full weight of cancel culture to bear. Well in light of all of that let me warn you: Trigger Warning Ahead! We are about to hear from a man about how women should dress and act in public. Paul is going to say that God has made husband an authority over their wives; he is going to deny the relativizing of gender and insist on the created binary of male and female; he is even going to dictate to a woman's appearance in public.

We begin a new section in 1 Corinthians where Paul deals with matters related to their gatherings, head coverings, the Lord's Supper and spiritual gifts, spanning until the end of chapter 14. In all these instances they are failing in some way and Paul has to give strong direction and instruction. So Paul begins with a commendation before he gets to correction, v2, 'Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.' Traditions here indicates the beliefs and practices that he has received and handed on them, e.g. 11:23; 15:3. The first matter that he deals with is the matter of the proper way that a woman should dress for worship, in particular head coverings. For some unknown reason the women in the Corinthian church were abandoning the head covering that all women would have worn in the Greek-Roman context. It should be recognized that women covering their heads in the ancient world was a common practice across many cultures, it was not a practice invented by Christians but a cultural practice that spoke of a woman's virtue and marital status. In the ancient world both men and women wore robes and the primary way the sexes distinguished themselves was by their hair and what they wore upon their heads. It appears that the Corinthian women were controversially casting off these cultural conventions which would no doubt undermine the truth of God and the gospel in the Corinthian context. It is not altogether what was motivating this deviation from

the cultural norm. Some have suggested that there was an over emphasis on realized eschatology where Christians were to be like the angels, not marry and give up the traditional gender roles. Some have suggested that there were prophetesses who were prophesying with their hair let down like the prophetesses of the pagan religions. Others have suggested that it was an honest oversight, because where a woman would go uncovered at home when with family and friends, but go covered in public, some suggest that the church meeting which was in a home, with brothers and sisters in the Lord was being treated as a private rather than a public setting. In truth we cannot know exactly what drove this practice, Paul does not give us enough info to go on. And we should be careful not to rest our interpretation too heavily on any particular historical reconstruction. We are able the clear teaching of the word of God not implications drawn from tenuous historical reconstructions.

The added difficulty with this section is that there are many differing interpretations. I will attempt to keep all the various views that are put forward out of our message today. If you are interested in a deeper investigation into these things there is a 6 hour lecture on YouTube that I can point you to. Today as we look at this text we have three headings. Paul is going to argue that it is appropriate that the Corinthian women wear the typical symbol of authority on her head in wearing a head covering when she participates publicly in worship. In v3 he will assert the truth of male headship; then in v4-6 he will apply this principle to the practice of wearing head coverings; and then in v7-16 he will bring a number of arguments and clarifications to his point. Male headship, asserted, applied and argued.

Male headship asserted

V3, '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 could have turned around and said, 'Married women in general wear head coverings, of course you should too.' But instead he turns this into a teaching moment. Before addressing the particular point about head coverings he returns to foundational principles, namely that God works in the human race with authority relationships. Paul puts forward three key ones. Every male is subject to the Lordship of Christ. Men are not laws unto themselves. Paul believes in male authority in the church and the home, and here he is clarifying that men are under the rule of Christ, and any authority they have is to be done in conformity to Christ's will, and His will is good and loving and seeks the good of those under it. Paul is hinting at accountable leadership. Secondly, the head of the wife is her husband. Now in the Greek it literally reads, 'and head of woman the man.' Is Paul saying that the head of every woman is every man? Because Paul calls the wives to submit to their own husbands in Eph. 5:22, translators have, I think, correctly chosen to translate man as husband and woman as wife. Some have tried to use this verse to make the case that there should be no females in any leadership positions in the world at all, but that is to make this verse say too much. Thirdly, the head of Christ is God. Now the Father; the Son; and the Spirit are co-equal in nature and in authority, but when the Son was incarnate, the Son was the perfect servant who obeyed every commandment of God. In His divine nature He was co-equal, holding co-authority; but in His human nature He could say, 'The Father is greater than I;' 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent me.'

So there it is, the head of a wife is her husband, that is the counter-cultural truth that our world desperately needs today. Women are being destroyed as their

unique role and responsibilities in God are being undermined as feminism has insisted that men and women not be treated as equal yet different. The Bible teaches that husbands are to be loving heads like Christ who laid down His life for the church. This is not an authority so that the man can have a personal servant, but authority for the purpose of leading the partnership of man and wife into the will of God, not his own will. The helpful thing that Paul points out is that Christ, who is the divine Son submitted to the Father in His incarnation and was no less divine for doing so. Likewise we can infer that women are not made inferior because they are given the role of support not leadership in marriage. Paul calls in this theological truth to uphold the cultural practice of head coverings in Corinth as they are in agreement with it.

Male headship applied

V4-6, '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.' Moving from the principle of male headship Paul now moves to the relevant application demonstrating how doctrine grounds practice. Paul insists that the appropriate way for men to pray or prophesy is uncovered; and the woman when praying or prophesying should be covered. He reasons that the husband who covers his physical head dishonours his metaphorical head—Christ. Likewise the woman who does not cover her physical head dishonours her metaphorical head—her husband. At this point some have tried to argue that Paul is concerned about hair not head coverings, that his point is that men should not have long hair and women should, but I agree with the majority of commentators that the typical veil/shawl is what is being referred to here. Likewise some have tried to prove that women were permitted to preach because they were permitted to prophesy, 1 Tim. 2:11-15 makes clear this is not true. There are various views about women prophesying. Those like Calvin thought that they only prophesied privately not publicly and Paul is speaking here only hypothetically. Some say that these verses are not yet talking about the worship service but private contexts, and the call for women to be silent in 14:34 applies in public contexts. Personally I am happy that women prophesied but did not preach, as a cessationist I believe that function has ceased, and the call to be silent is with regards to weighing the prophecies, an eldership function, not with prophesying altogether.

Paul argues that if a wife acts in public without acknowledging her husband that this would be the same as shaving her head; and because that is disgraceful she should wear a head covering. To properly appreciate what he is saying we need to appreciate the role of head coverings and women shaving their heads in the context. Kevin DeYoung writes, "Roman women in late antiquity were to be marked above all else by pudicitia (Latin for "modesty"), and for a mature woman to wear her hair unveiled was one of the chief signs of sexual immodesty." Women who went out in public without a covering were looked down upon. Shaving a wife's hair off was the penalty that a husband would inflict upon a wife who had committed adultery. He would cut off all her hair as a way to shame her in an honour-shame culture and send her away. Another commentator writes, "Respectable women did nothing to draw attention to themselves.... A veil or hood constituted a warning: it signified that the wearer was a respectable woman that no man dare approach without risking ...

penalties. A woman who went out ... unveiled forfeited the protection of Roman law against possible attackers who were entitled to plead extenuating circumstances"¹ Women going around bareheaded was listed as a sexual incitement because it advertised availability. How does not wearing a head covering dishonor her husband? How is not wearing a head covering equal to having a shaven head in that context? By these quotes we can see that a woman was not being modest and giving wrong messages about her availability which is dishonouring to her husband. The public perception of what is modest and suitable for a married woman to wear seems to be in the foreground. MacArthur adds, 'In many Near East countries today a married woman's veil still signifies that she will not expose herself to other men, that her beauty and charms are reserved entirely for her husband, that she does not care even to be noticed by other men. Similarly, in the culture of first-century Corinth wearing a head covering while ministering or worshiping was a woman's way of stating her devotion and submission to her husband and of demonstrating her commitment to God.'² And so given all that going without a head covering meant in the context Paul gives the only imperative in this section, 'let her cover her head.'

And so we come to the question we must ask, are Christian women to be wearing head coverings today? The answer is yes, no, depends. If you are in a context where a married woman not wearing a head covering is understood to be a shameful thing, then you should. Christian missionaries in certain honour culture settings where head coverings still hold certain connotations would do well to not being a hindrance to the gospel and conform to cultural norms as long as they do not violate scripture. For the most part in the West head coverings no longer have these connotations. The modern day equivalent would be if Christian wives started taking off their wedding rings and changing their married names back to their maiden names. I do not believe that we can copy and paste this issue from the Corinthian context into our own. There are principles that we can highlight that we can apply. We can highlight the high calling and the goodness in being married; we can lean into the different roles and responsibilities of men and women; we have a key opportunity in an age full of confusion to speak about men and women as equal yet different; we can point to God's wisdom in appointing headship in the home and the church, and how human flourishing happens when we embrace and do what we are made for. Men and women both should dress in a way that does not draw attention to themselves, that does not broadcast sexual undertones, that is in keeping with modesty and propriety. Men should dress as men and women as women, we should bring up our boys and girls in the same way. Generally speaking Paul's method in dealing with this matter shows that Christians are not those on the edges seeking to break down social norms but in the center upholding traditional values. As Christians we should not be party to those who are seeking to relativize gender roles and norms. We are salt and light resisting the tide of these relativizing influences. I am not here to tell you how long your hair must be or what items of your wardrobe are forbidden. I am here to preach the principles and you before God have to work these things out with a clean conscience. The Corinthians had to resist being more liberal than the surrounding conservative norms; we have to lean into being more conservative than the ambiguity and relativism all around

1 David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 521.

2 John F. MacArthur Jr., [1 Corinthians](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 256.

us. We have light for their darkness, truth for their lies, clarity for their confusion, liberty for their bondage.

Male headship argued

Paul has asserted the truth about male headship; he has applied it in this context in the matter of head coverings, the rest of this section is a number of further arguments that he rallies to enforce his point. V7-10 forms the first part, '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.' V10 makes clear that Paul is supporting the application of male headship in head coverings, 'that is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head.' Paul gives four points, man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man; Eve was made from Adam; Eve was made for Adam, and because of the angels. Each of these points has been contested and read to try and make Paul out to be a sexist patriarchal chauvinist. Firstly, where Paul says that woman the glory of man, he is not denying that men and woman are equally made in the image of God and have an equal standing in God's presence. Paul believes in the literal account of the creation of Adam and Eve and is referring to the fact that Adam was made first and was able to exercise his rule over creation without Eve. Men have been given the role of reflecting God's kingly reign in having this authority. Adam exercised this authority acting as God's vice-regent and reflecting His glory before Eve was created. A wife is her husband's vice-regent, she submits and puts his plan under God into action. Paul is not saying that women are inferior or less in any way, but stating a fact about authority. Secondly, this order of authority and purpose as a helper to the man is underlined in Eve being made from Adam's side. Matthew Henry's comments are worth quoting here, 'The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.' Paul makes the connection for us as he teases out this idea in the third thought, that Eve was made for Adam. Adam was single, and lonely and needed a helper, Eve was created for this purpose, not vice versa. Paul is drawing on these facts to reinforce the fact that the husband is the head of his wife, that there is an authority relationship, and therefore it is appropriate to adopt those cultural conventions that reinforce these truths and not blithely cast away those things that uphold them.

Paul's point regarding the angels is more obscure. The theories here are legion. Some take the word messengers to mean human observers; some view it as preventing angels from feeling tempted to mate with female human beings; some see it as an imitation of the angels covering themselves in Is. 6:2; some it as a rhetorical point used by Paul to push back at those who said that we are like the angels in an over-realized eschatological reality that justifies casting off gender roles. The two simplest and best options to my mind are that the Corinthians knew something that Paul had mentioned about the angels that made this statement intelligible to them; or that the angels are under authority, and the fallen angels abandoned their place and did not accept it, and that we like them should accept God's order.

V11-12, '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.' Now lest anyone get the idea that that Paul is arguing for the superiority of man he now adds this important clarification. He speaks about the interdependence of men and women; and ultimately how all things are from God not ultimately from either male or female, but from God through them. There can be no pride, no conceit, no prejudice and despising of the other. Who can be superior when we are ultimately creatures dependent upon God?

In light of all Paul has said he brings things to a conclusion, v13-16, '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.' Firstly, he asks them to draw their own conclusions whether it is appropriate given all they have heard and the way head coverings function in Corinth if it is not self-evident that the women should continue to wear the head covering and not cease the practice, v13. Secondly, v14-15 which have often been misunderstood to mean that hair has been given for a covering are instead an argument from nature. The argument goes something like this: if even in nature women tend to have long hair and natural covering, is it not fitting then that they should continue to use the head covering and not give it up. Thirdly, Paul says that if anyone wants to be contentious, the churches of the first century don't have another practice, they all continue to utilize the head covering which all the cultures then used.

So how do we apply a text like this? Firstly, I think we can appreciate that Paul is willing to continue a good cultural practice because it upholds and agrees with biblical teaching. Male headship and modesty in dress are good things and Paul willingly continues to use this cultural item, in one sense redeeming it and even utilizing more appropriately. This helps us to negotiate our own cultural context. Sometimes through common grace there will be things in culture which we can embrace and lean into because they support biblical truth. For example, marriage anniversaries, these aren't in the bible, but in a context where marriage is disparaged, it is a good thing to celebrate the longevity of our marriages and be deliberate in cultivating their health. Mother's day and father's day would be other things that sadly are now counter-cultural. Secondly, we need to double down on the differences between men and women; we need to embrace the goodness of God's design in male leadership and female submission. We should be seeking to nurture our men to be servant leaders in their marriages. We want to avoid all the sins that go with bad leadership and put on display through strong and healthy families what mature, spiritual manhood looks like in an age desperate for it. Likewise we want to embrace God's plan for women, their role in relation to their husbands, the responsibilities towards their families and stop trying to force women into something God has not made them for.

Thirdly, although the West no longer utilizes head coverings there is a great need for modest dress. I was watching the testimony of a young woman this week wear she spoke about how modesty has changed her life. She used to dress to attract men putting everything on display wearing clothes too tight, too tiny, and too transparent, wearing no undergarments and leaving nothing to the imagination. She spoke about the sorts of guys that she would attract. Then she started to dress modestly and her world changed and suddenly the men who started showing an interest in her changed as well. Paul is speaking about how

one dresses for worship, but that should not be the exception to how we dress but set the tone for the rest of our lives. The head covering was used to show men that they were not objects to be ogled, that they did not desire that sort of attention, that they were not single and would not welcome their inappropriate advances. The head covering was a way of signaling that they upheld conservative morals and norms around marriage and sexuality. As Christians we have an external witness to uphold, and both men and women should be communicating that their bodies are for their spouses to enjoy and not everyone else; that they are modest; conservative; and not seeking to offend, or draw unnecessary attention.

Fourthly, let me end with a gospel emphasis as we prepare ourselves for the table. Adam was a husband who had authority, but who failed to serve his wife, protect his wife, lay down his life for his wife. The first husband and wife sinned against each other in discarding their God given roles causing tremendous damage. But the Last Adam has come and has served an unwilling bride who wanted nothing to do with Him; who gave all of Himself to secure her life; He took the penalty of our sin, dying the death that we deserve. 'who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.' And now we come to seat at a table with Him, one that speaks of what our perfect Bridegroom has done, that speaks of what lies ahead for us as His bride.