

Head Coverings and Haircuts

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

The meaning of most passages of Scripture is quite clear. Ordinary people can approach a passage of Scripture with faith and humility and understand what the author is trying to say. In His goodness, God has communicated in the Scriptures in a way that is clear to ordinary people. That's why we encourage everyone to read and meditate upon the Scriptures; we don't believe that the truths of Scripture are accessible to only a few people who hold the keys for everybody else. (This doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is known as "the perspicuity of Scripture.")

A couple of qualifications are in order. First, the perspicuity of Scripture does not mean, "I don't need anybody else to help me understand and live out the Scriptures." We'll see in 1 Corinthians 12 that we are interdependent in the body of Christ – even when it comes to understanding Scripture. Second, the perspicuity of Scripture doesn't mean that every single passage of Scripture is easy to understand. The meaning of Psalm 23, for example, is rather obvious ("The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want . . ."). The meaning of Genesis 6 where the "sons of God" took wives from the "daughters of men" is not so obvious. Some passages of Scripture require serious study and contemplation to understand. And even sincere, godly believers disagree on the interpretation and application of some passages of Scripture.

We come to one of those passages today in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. In this passage Paul talks about head coverings, and haircuts. Every major term and every aspect of the cultural context are debated. Theologians and commentators look at the same Greek words and come to very different conclusions about this passage. Some people argue that we should adopt the exact same practices today in American churches that Paul commanded in the Corinthian church, while others (including me) conclude that Paul's commands were obviously a cultural application of deeper issues.

My conviction is that we need to ask, what were the deeper issues that Paul was addressing when he wrote about head coverings and length of hair? When I ask that question, I come up with two answers: 1) respect God-given distinctions between men and women, and 2) avoid tempting others in worship through your appearance. In my understanding, head coverings and the length of your hair sent signals about these two issues. What I'll argue is that these two issues (gender distinctions and not being a temptation to others in worship) are just as important today as they were in Paul's day. But since head coverings and haircuts don't send the same signals in our culture as they did in Corinth, our application will be different.

That's where we're going in this message. But let me state explicitly that we don't have the type of confidence about our interpretation of this passage that we might on other passages; there are lots of things about this passage that I don't understand. Therefore – as always – I need to hold my interpretation of this passage with humility.

Sending the Right Signals in Worship (1 Corinthians 11:2-16)

Whenever he could, Paul commended the Corinthians for doing something right. These opportunities were few and far between, but we find one here in verse 2:

2 Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

Generally speaking, the Corinthians followed Paul's teachings – probably his teachings concerning freedoms. Nevertheless, as we continue to read, we see that there were some serious problems related to their corporate worship. Today we'll consider one such issue (head coverings and haircuts). In coming weeks we'll consider others (their disunity at the Lord's Table and their misuse of spiritual gifts).

Our best understanding of what's happening in this passage is that some believers in Corinth were misusing their freedom in Christ when it came to corporate worship. They apparently had the attitude, "We're free in Christ, so it doesn't matter whether or not we wear a covering on our heads, and it doesn't matter whether our hair is long or short." If you're like me, you're thinking, "That's exactly right. Those things *don't* matter. What matters is your faith in Jesus and your heart." But the cultural context of Corinth in the first century made head coverings and haircuts significant. And so Paul makes clear that something deeper was at stake.

In verse 3 Paul introduces the concept of "headship" simply stating that men, women, and Christ each have someone who can be called his/her "head."

3 But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

The term "head" was most often used literally to refer to a physical head on a physical body. Head also had the metaphorical meanings of "source" or "authority" or "preeminence." People argue strenuously for different meanings. My conclusion is that the term "head" does have the connotation of authority (but not necessarily superiority). The exact nature of headship differs in each of the pairs of relationships Paul mentions, but authority seems to be the common thread.

"Christ is the head of every man." In Colossians 1:18 Paul said that Christ is the head of all believers – both men and women in the body of Christ. But here Paul singles out men. As the One who died for our sins, we gladly look to Jesus as our head/authority.

"The man is the head of a woman." Paul is probably talking about marriage here: a husband is the head of his wife (instead of every man being the head of every woman). Paul developed the idea more fully in Ephesians 5. Men are to love and sacrifice for their wives as Jesus did for the church; wives are supposed to welcome this role of their husbands (concept of "submitting"). Men and women are equal in Christ (Galatians 3:28), and yet the man is the head of the woman. This is by God's design.

"God is the head of Christ." God is not superior to Christ; they are equal in essence. Nevertheless there is an element of authority in God being the head of Christ. God did send His Son; the Son came and died willingly, but He was sent by the Father. There is authority in God being the head of Christ, but there is also deep unity. (Authority and unity are a common thread in each of the three pairs of relationships in this verse.)

Beginning in verse 4 Paul states that what you wear on your [physical] head (while you pray or prophesy) either honors or dishonors your [spiritual] head.

4 Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.

Paul is saying that if a man wears something on his head (a hat or a hood) while praying or prophesying, he disgraces Christ (his spiritual head). It's interesting to notice in our culture that men take off a ball cap or a hat during the national anthem, the pledge of allegiance, or when a prayer is being said. There's a sense that it's somehow disrespectful to have your head covered up at certain times. Something similar was true in Paul's day when a man had something on his head while praying or prophesying. Some suggest that men wore head coverings when they worshipped Greek gods; others suggest that a man wearing a head covering signified homosexuality. Sending such signals (pagan worship or homosexuality) would be a distraction in worship. This might be analogous to a man wearing a dress and lipstick to church today.

Paul says just the opposite about women:

5 But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.

A woman who prays or prophesies with her head **uncovered** disgraces her head – namely “the man” of verse 3, her husband. In verse 10 Paul will refer to this head covering as a “sign of authority.” In Paul's mind, such a woman without this sign of her husband's authority was no different from a woman who shaved her head, which was clearly a sign of disgrace in Corinthian culture. If you saw a woman with her head uncovered or shaved, you were probably looking at a prostitute. Women who prayed with uncovered heads were sending the signal, “I'm sexually available.” I think you'll agree that sending that signal would be quite a distraction (and even temptation) for the men in the church at Corinth.

6 For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.

If you're going to send signals about your availability, why not go all the way and shave your head. Of course Paul was being sarcastic; he really wanted them to wear head coverings.

In verses 7 through 9 Paul argues from the order of creation (the order in which Adam and Eve were created) that there are God-given distinctions between men and women. In Corinth these distinctions were being blurred by their head coverings (or lack thereof) and their haircuts.

7 For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.

Since a man is created in the image of God and is supposed to glorify God, he shouldn't send different signals by having his head covered – that he was loyal to pagan gods or that he was homosexual. Of course a woman is also created in the image of God, but Paul is making a different point. He is pointing out that a wife can either honor or dishonor her husband by the signals she sends through a head covering.

8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; 9 for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.

This is a reference to Genesis 2 which records that Adam didn't find a suitable "helper" from among the animals, so God took a rib from the man and created the woman. In that sense, the woman originated from man. The woman was created as a helper for the man.

10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

As the discussion so far has suggested, a head covering was an appropriate symbol of authority for a woman to wear her head; it symbolized that she was rightly related to her husband. In our culture, a wedding ring is the primary signal that a person is married. Our missionaries to India tell me that there are a total of 16 different markers for a married woman in India (nose pin, red paste in the hair, bangles, etc.). When we read "because of the angels" we think, "Thanks, Paul. Now *that* clears things up!" There are lots of suggestions on what this means. At the very least this comment suggests that when we worship, there is more going on than meets the eye; the unseen spiritual world is watching.

In verses 11 and 12 Paul qualifies himself lest the Corinthians misapply what he's said so far about the man being the head of the woman.

11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.

In the Lord men and women are interdependent. In Christ men and women are in partnership with one another, seeking and serving God as part of the larger body of Christ. In verse 12 Paul supports this idea with an observation:

12 For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.

Paul simply observes that there wouldn't be any men if women hadn't given birth to little baby boys. That biological fact suggests that by God's design men are not independent of women.

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

In our culture, we answer the question, "Sure, it's proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered . . . women do so all the time." But in Corinthian culture, the answer was obviously, "No, it is not proper."

14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

In appealing to "nature" Paul is appealing to the generally-accepted custom of men having shorter hair than women. There were some notable exceptions which Paul knew well. Samson

had long hair by the command of God; those who took a Nazarite vow (Numbers 6) didn't cut their hair or drink wine for an extended period of time. But in general, men have shorter hair. And in general women have longer hair. The last statement in verse 15, "For her hair is given to her for a covering," has caused some to conclude that long hair gathered up on top of a woman's head *is* the head covering Paul has been describing all along (again, not my understanding).

16 But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

In other words, Paul's teaching reflected the established practice among churches in his day. Therefore, the Corinthians should accept his teaching and not stir up strife.

What are the implications for us? If this passage is really about respecting distinctions between men and women and about avoiding tempting others through our appearance in worship, what are the implications for us?

As I mentioned earlier, some churches and denominations don't see anything in Paul's commands that are culturally conditioned. They conclude that women should wear some type of cloth covering on their heads, that men's hair should be short, and women's hair should be long. On occasion there may be people in our midst who hold these convictions. In that case, as Lowell explained, those who don't have such convictions need to "practice their freedom in conscience with love." We need to respect others' convictions and give people the space to follow their conscience on the matter.

My conclusion, however, is that the real issue is not head coverings and haircuts. The deeper issue involves the signals we send through our appearance – especially in worship. American culture is much more egalitarian than many cultures; a wedding ring is one of the few markers that a person is married. A woman not wearing a head covering here at Faith doesn't send the signal, "I'm available (relationally or sexually)." In some cultures it still does, but not ours. And length of hair doesn't generally send signals in our culture that it might in other cultures. People don't generally read anything into a woman having short hair or a man with long hair. It's hard for me to see much application related to respecting God-given gender distinctions.

In my mind, the primary application of our passage involves being mindful of other ways that our appearance can send the wrong signals to others in worship. Whereas head coverings and haircuts sent signals in Corinth, perhaps the issue for us is ***modesty*** for us. A lack of modesty – on the part of men or women – can distract others from worshipping God when we gather. I would assume that very few people show up in worship with the intention of distracting someone else sexually or sending signals such as, "I'm available." Nevertheless, we should pay attention to the signals we send. As a man, I'm more clued in to how guys can be distracted when women aren't dressed modestly. On the one hand, guys/men need to cultivate self-control when it comes to our eyes and our minds. On the other hand, girls/women need to be mindful to dress modestly. Of course this is all very subjective; what is suggestive to one person isn't to another. We aren't going to institute a dress code. I would simply appeal to our common love for God and for each other: be mindful not to be a distraction to others through lack of modesty.

Those are my best thoughts on 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. I encourage you to keep pondering this passage. As always, this message is the first word – not the last word – on this topic. Happily, next week we'll move on to Paul's teaching about the Lord's Table.