

# “The Women & Head Covering Issue in Corinth ”

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:1-16

10/22/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

The text we’ll focus on this morning is *the most difficult to understand passage in the Bible*. There are so many facts about the immediate church context of that fledgling house-church in the city of Corinth, that if we haven’t been spending all this Fall talking about the Corinthians, we could never even attempt to deal with this passage. There were social traditions in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism and the Greek-speaking Roman society of that metropolis that need explaining. Then there was also Paul’s free-flowing stream-of-consciousness thinking out loud that make the verses seem abrupt. There are also numerous Greek language issues that further complicate our understanding.

For all those reasons, all the Christian denominations (that create the lectionary of scriptures for the church year) omit this passage. Frankly, there are more articles in the professional and educational publications on this passage, I think, than for other difficult passages.<sup>1</sup> But for once, I’d like to try to deal with it because we have invested many Sundays in this particular work of Paul. So as I briefly summarize the unusual and unique context of that troubled church, it should sound familiar to you by now.

The larger picture, of course, is that Paul had written this letter to a church that was on the brink of breaking apart – not for one or two reasons but for many. By now, you know that this house-church, that he had started, was plagued by internal factions created by extremely strong personalities. You know it had articulate teachers in it who not only aggressively criticized Paul as a person and Christian leader – they had been actively teaching their heretical theology (that we, today, refer to as Gnosticism). They had claimed to possess secret

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<sup>1</sup> It is, quite pointedly, the most difficult passage with which to deal in the opinion of all of the theological seminary professors I have had either had as instructors or from whom I have read their research through the years.

wisdom from God which promoted a variety of distortions<sup>2</sup> of the message of and about Christ.

You remember that some of them, in exaggerating Paul’s teaching of our freedom from the Jewish law, ended up teaching that “anything goes” because we don’t have to earn our way into God’s love. You also recall that others went in the other direction toward a Puritan-like legalism and taught that you should live like a monk or nun and if you wanted a marriage-like companionship, you should become celibate partners for Jesus’ sake.

On top of that, they had some Jewish converts to the faith as well as a majority of Gentile converts who had grown up in that cosmopolitan New-York-City-like seaport center of wealth, commerce and international tourist trade. Additionally, there was a clash and blending of diverse cultures.

Back in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism of the Palestinian area, it was very provincial. Women were owned as property by their fathers and husbands and had no legal, social, educational or financial rights. The differences between the formative years of some of the Jewish converts and what they were experiencing in that society in Greece was huge. It would be like picking up a person from a small rural Midwestern town in the 1940’s and dropping them down in New York City today. The cultural place and role of women, in that Greco-Roman cosmopolitan city, was an entire universe away from the 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism some of them had known. And all these many factors were coming together at once for this small group of Christians whom Paul had originally gathered as a result of his powerful public speaking and debating initiatives. Pushing the limits of sounding redundant, I don’t think I can say this forcefully enough, . . . but if you ever hear someone pull one of these verses out of this section of text and ignore all its complex historical and religious context, just walk away. They’re wasting your time and theirs. Yet we will try.

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<sup>2</sup> what we could consider distortions today

Among the list of problems in that church, to which Paul was responding in this letter, was how women leaders were dressed as they were leading in the worship services. Because the status of women had been changing, in that more enlightened culture in Corinth, and because Jesus and Paul had openly appreciated and praised women's active involvement in Christian ministry, women were now becoming more involved in worship services.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus' practice of viewing men and women as equals continued on in the life of the early church. Unlike his Jewish contemporaries, Paul approved of and praised women holding responsible positions in the church.<sup>4</sup>

From chapter 11 through 14, Paul was confronting their behavior and attitudes in public worship services. This issue about women not wearing veils was his first – on his list of several problems in their corporate worship. We'll work

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<sup>3</sup> This contrasted with Judaism some of them had known. This also contrasted with a few of the religions in that society, such as the official state religion of Mithraism (which was only for men). **Mithraism** used names taken from ancient Persian mythology and developed quickly under the religious-tolerant Hellenistic culture. It focused on astrology and tried to link its deity Mithras to control of the universe and solar year. After his birth on December 25<sup>th</sup>, Mithras was said to be visited by shepherds Mithraism was Christianity's leading competitor during the first three centuries and featured some rituals paralleling those of the church, including baptism, sharing a communal meal and administering oaths of celibacy. Mithraism had one fatal flaw: Women could not be admitted to the god's service. When the Christian church, which baptized women as well as men, overcame its chief rival, it retained one of Mithraism's most potent symbols, the natal day of its lord December 25<sup>th</sup>. Because the solstice appropriately signified the birth of God's Son, "the light of the world" (as well as the rebirth of the Mithraic sun), the church eventually chose Mithras's birthday to celebrate as that of Jesus. See Harris, *The New Testament*,

A Student's Introduction (ISBN 0-7674-0014-3] p44.

<sup>4</sup> He mentioned that Euodia and Syntyche had labored side-by-side with him in the gospel (Philippians 4:2-3). We also know that Christians benefited from the leadership of various women because of the ten women mentioned in Romans 16, seven are commended; four are called "hard workers in the gospel ministry" (Romans 16:6, 12); Junias is called noteworthy among the apostles and Phoebe is referred to as a deaconess (vv. 1-2). See Siddons, *Speaking Out For Women*, [ISBN: 0-8170-0885-3] out of print, p.63.

through these sixteen verses slowly to try to reconstruct Paul's complex thinking.

It is clear (from 11:5) that women were leading in prayer and prophesying in church services. The purpose of prophecy was, in all probability, what we know to be the purpose of preaching today: "upbuilding, encouragement and consolation" (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14:3).

To fully participate in worship was a new experience for first century Jewish-Christian women. Formerly, they had to remain behind screens in the synagogue service where they were spectators rather than active participants. Now they had the opportunity to pray aloud and speak directly to other worshippers in the congregation. But some problems arose in that church.<sup>5</sup>

Paul was so personally upset about women leaders leading in worship services without their traditional veils on their heads, that he resorted to no less than five different arguments for why they should keep their veils on. He wasn't upset that the women were praying and preaching in church. He was just concerned about them not wearing their veils.

Paul saw that some of these women leaders were exercising their new freedom in society by removing their veils during the worship. In this first-century culture, certain hairstyles and the wearing of veils signified that a woman was married, much like the wearing of a wedding ring does today.<sup>6</sup> The grown women who went about the city of Corinth, without veils, were prostitutes. Additionally, it was common practice for the temples (to the other gods) to use prostitutes in their cult as part of their worship and fundraising. So it's not that Paul objected to them not wearing veils that is difficult to understand.

What makes this complex, two thousand years later, is his elusive reasoning for why they shouldn't

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<sup>5</sup> There was not a uniform set of laws carried out in every community worship center in Palestine because these customs were based on the oral traditions of the rabbis. This unevenness was clear in the case of their diverse rulings on the matter of divorce.

<sup>6</sup> According to the Jewish Talmud, if women abandoned their veils, they flaunted their marriage vows. This constituted grounds for divorce. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, [ISBN: 0-8006-6005-6] p185, n. 39.

take off their veils in church. Here is how Paul started out on this:

<sup>11:1</sup>Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. <sup>2</sup>I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you. <sup>3</sup>But I want you to understand that Christ is the **head** (κεφαλή) of every man, and the husband is the **head** of his wife, and God is the **head** of Christ.

Often this complex passage has been interpreted to indicate a man's authority over his wife – based on the order of creation. Traditionally, some commentators have argued that since man was made first and was said to be in God's image, and since woman was thought to be made in man's image but not God's,<sup>7</sup> women, then, were thought to be subordinate to men. Wearing a veil, then, was to remind women that they were to remain under the authority of their husbands. But this traditional hierarchical interpretation is the opposite of what we already know of Paul's high view of women in ministry.

The two issues that are difficult for us to understand in this text are the husband's so-called "headship" and the function of veils. Paul's use of the word (κεφαλή) for "head" or "source" was used in connection with a husband and wife relationship.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, the word was used to refer to the head of a human being and five times, Christ was called the head of the corner (of the foundation).<sup>9</sup> Christ was called the head or the source of the lifeblood of the church. So it isn't a military chain-of-command hierarchical image or that would have made a hierarchy between God the Creator and Christ. This understanding of the word – to mean an intimacy connection – seems to be a better translation of the word, especially as we look at the whole of this passage.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> although there is no text to support this reasoning

<sup>8</sup> in this passage and probably by another author of Ephesians 5:23-24

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 21:42. The body is also spoken of as growing from the head (Ephesians 4:16; Colossians 2:19) as well as saying the body (Ephesians 5:23). See Markus Barth, *Ephesians*. The Anchor Bible, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1974) vol. 1, page 190.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, comps., *A Greek-English*

Paul was describing the intimacy in marriage to be like Christ's intimacy in relationship to God the Creator (1 Cor. 11:3). So Paul's first argument was for them to keep their veils on in order to maintain the Jewish traditions (11:2) as he had previously instructed them (when he was in that church). This was because veils visibly showed the distinctiveness between women and men and implied the intimate connection men and women have – despite their differences.

His second argument, in favor of women wearing veils, was contained in verses 4-6.

<sup>4</sup>Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, <sup>5</sup>but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. <sup>6</sup>For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil.

These three verses (11:4-6) summarized some of the Jewish worship customs – namely that men were to pray and speak publicly without their heads covered. Women were to wear their customary veils. The argument here was that it was just as disgraceful (for a woman to go unveiled) as it would be for her to be shaved (11:5). Therefore, women should be sure to wear a veil when standing before the worshipping community in prayer or preaching. If not, he suggested, why not cut her hair off (11:6) – which, presumably, no woman would consider doing in that culture.<sup>11</sup> So Paul's second argument was related to a "natural decency" in that custom of women wearing veils. 'It's only natural' he was suggesting.

Further, Paul was making sure that outsiders wouldn't confuse their Christian worship services with pagan services that involved sexually immoral priestesses of the Aphrodite cult who did not wear veils. This congregation's standing, in the modern city of Corinth, so concerned Paul that he resorted to three more arguments for why women should wear veils.<sup>12</sup>

*Lexicon*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), vol. 1, p.945.

<sup>11</sup> Recall the Old Testament "water of bitterness" test for adultery when the woman's experience was one of shame.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Mercandante, *From Hierarchy to Equality, A Comparison of Past and Present Interpretations of 1 Cor. 11:2-*

His third argument was that veils preserved the distinctiveness (of different genders) that should properly be evident among creatures in creation. (11:7-9)

<sup>7</sup>For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. <sup>8</sup>Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. <sup>9</sup>Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man.

In verses 7-9, Paul used a theological argument for women to wear veils. ‘Man is in the image of God and woman is the glory of man;’ but this does not imply that woman is more distant from God’s image than man. If so, Paul would have completed the parallelism that woman is in the image of man (instead of being the glory of man).<sup>13</sup> Both women and men were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Because woman was originally made as a helper-companion for man, who alone could not replenish the earth (Genesis 1:28), she was different.

Paul was not saying that the man was the lord and master of the woman. He was saying that man was the origin of her being in creation, remembering that woman was said, in the creation imagery, to be made from the man’s rib.<sup>14</sup> So Paul’s reasoning was that women were to show their distinction from men in creation by wearing a veil. The veil, then, was to be a witness to the authority of the Creator (Who made men and women as different). It showed her difference in the flow of creation and perhaps one thing further: her newfound authority. So Paul’s argument came down to this.

Paul was using the veil custom (which formerly meant subjection to men in those times) to mean several things.

(1) That Christian women in worship were not like

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*16 in Relation to the Changing Status of Women in Society* (Vancouver, B.C.: G-M-H Books, 1978) is an excellent summary on the treatment of the passagae.

<sup>13</sup> M. D. Hooker, “Authority on Her Head: An Examination of 1 Cor. XI.10,” *New Testament Studies*, vol. 10 (1963-1964), pp. 411-416.

<sup>14</sup> See Genesis 2:18-23 where woman is made to be a helper but not an inferior being to man.

the “immoral” women of that time who did not wear veils.

(2) That there was a closeness or intimacy in creation between men and women yet they existed as distinct sexes.

(3) In observing the use of veils, women proclaimed their prominent place in creation as the glory of men, who were their source in creation.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, the ordinary social significance of veils would be transcended. “As man in public worship manifests his authority (in creation) by leaving his head unveiled, so woman manifests hers by wearing a veil.”<sup>16</sup>

In verse 10, Paul gave a fourth reason for women to wear veils in the worship services: the angels.

<sup>10</sup>For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

The reference to angels has been interpreted in relation to Genesis 6:1-4. This referred to when “sons of God” (angels) were said to assault women on earth. This notion that veils were to protect worshipping women from evil angels seems somewhat far-fetched.<sup>17</sup>

A more likely view would be that Paul saw angels as guardians of the created order.<sup>18</sup> Remember, he had just written about the distinctiveness of men and women in the order of creation (1 Cor. 11:7), so Paul may have been reminding this congregation that the form of this world had not yet passed away (1 Cor. 7:26-31) and that the world’s categories of orderliness had not become obsolete.<sup>19</sup>

The authority,<sup>20</sup> that was symbolized by the woman’s head covering, was the new authority women themselves had through Christ – the authority of God in their lives. Paul thought that because woman was man’s glory, her head should be covered to hide the glory of man in the presence of God and

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<sup>15</sup> Bart, op. cit., p. 184. Barth points out that in the context of 1 Corinthians 11-13, the general discussion is how all members of the body are equally dependent upon one another. *Head* for Paul is used as if it were just another equally dependent member of the body.

<sup>16</sup> F.F. Bruce, [ISBN: 0-551-00600-5] p.106

<sup>17</sup> Hooker, p. cit., p.412.

<sup>18</sup> Hooker

<sup>19</sup> Bruce, op. cit., p.106

<sup>20</sup> *exousia*

God's angels.<sup>21</sup> That's why "If she were to pray or prophesy with her head uncovered, she would not be glorifying God but reflecting the glory of man and in God's presence, this must inevitably turn to shame."<sup>22</sup>

So Paul's teaching suggested that women should see that their physical presence did not distract other worshipers from their focus on God. This certainly did not indicate that women today should wear veils or hats or any other outmoded style of dress (as some have insisted).

It did, however, suggest that women should not dress specifically and solely to attract attention to themselves but the same principle should apply directly to men as well.

To insure that his readers did not start to think that head covering indicated women's subjection to men, Paul reinforced the concept of mutuality in 11:11-12. Just as woman found her origin in man (11:8), man is to remember that he, in turn, comes into through the woman. Each one owes existence to and cannot exist without the other.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. <sup>12</sup>For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God.

In verses 13-15, Paul returned to use his second argument once again – the "it's natural" argument – in support of women wearing veils.

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

Here, he rhetorically asked them to judge for themselves what was proper. It was almost like saying, "Let's take a poll and see what the majority of you think!" He implied his answer to be correct, suggesting that long hair on women was a natural head covering for the reasons he had already mentioned (11:7-8). And he wound up his

<sup>21</sup> Hooker, op. cit, p.106.

<sup>22</sup> Hooker, 415.

<sup>23</sup> Charles K. Barrett, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), p.255.

pronouncements on this issue with a fifth reason women should wear veils: "it's the way everyone else does it in the other churches."

<sup>16</sup>But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

Pulling this together, Paul was greatly concerned with the tendency of this congregation to be insensitive to social customs. Outsiders might be misled to think that Christian worship involved pagan practices. Paul strongly believed that veils symbolized a natural dignity of women in relation to men in creation.

Paul's theological reasoning for women wearing veils in church, for the sake of creation (11:7-9) and for the angels (11:10) was probably easily understood by that congregation since he had spoken to them on many occasions. Biblical scholars today, however, continue to struggle in understanding this brief and puzzling passage. But despite the difficulties in this text, Paul at least appeared to be arguing for their adherence to the veil custom because of a positive and high view of women – rather than the opposite.

Paul didn't want the Corinthian Christians to do something that was disgraceful (11:6) or unnatural (11:14) because women, as distinct beings from men, embodied a glory (11:7) in creation that should be reflected in even the clothing customs of the worshiping community.

To make all this practical, here are a few questions to take home.

(1) In Paul's writings to this church, he warned about a few individuals perhaps drawing attention to themselves in church (and in this case, during worship). Can you think of times when individuals have acted so as to draw attention to themselves in various church settings during your life?

(2) In the churches you've experienced, have you ever seen church situations where one gender, more than the other, had more power or authority – simply because they were men or women? How has your own denomination ruled on that issue?

(3) What do you think the Christian church will eventually do in terms of giving women full leadership responsibilities in ministry? How do you fit into helping or inhibiting that direction?

(4) And lastly, in what ways do you think secular society is ahead of the church in giving women and men equal status? And how does that relate to your own household? ■

