

1 Corinthians 11.2-16: Headship

[Praise] **A.** Apostolic authority (v.2)

[Principle] **B.** *Theological* basis of headship and its symbols – uncovered and covered heads (vv.3-6)

[Pattern] **C.** *Creatorial* basis of headship (11.7). Man had *priority* in creation (vv.8-9)

[Priority] **D.** **SYMBOLICAL** basis of headship – “**BECAUSE OF THE ANGELS**” (v.10)

[Pattern] **C.** *Creatorial* basis of headship. Interdependence – no *superiority* in creation (vv.11-12)

[Propriety] **B.** *Natural* basis of headship and its symbols – short hair and long hair (vv.13-15)

[Practice] **A.** Apostolic authority (v.16)

[Adapted from private correspondence with **David Vallance**]

The Praise of the Apostle [v.2]

v.2: The use of “now” (*de*) rather than “now concerning” (*de peri*) suggests this is not an issue raised by the Corinthians themselves, but a matter of which the apostle had *heard* (1.11). As the chiasm of 1 Corinthians 11-14 has shown, this section marks the beginning of his dealing with the order of church gathering. The matter of headship was therefore critical, underpinning all the teaching that follows. “I praise (commend) you” contrasts with “I praise you not” (11.17, 22). They were to be commended for they continually “remembered” Paul “in all things”. This is not a matter of fondly recalling the apostle to mind or praying for him, but a way of describing their respect of Paul’s apostolic authority and desire to be obedient to the directions he had given for public worship – though they may not have heeded every detail. Generally speaking, they were “keeping the ordinances” he had “delivered” (to ‘give into the hands of another’) to them. The word “ordinances” is normally translated ‘traditions’ and refers to, literally, ‘the things (teaching) handed on’ from the apostles. There are *three* types of traditions in the NT. **1.** Rabbinic traditions (cf. Mark 7.7-9). **2.** Human traditions – often false teaching of human origin (Colossians 2.8). **3.** Apostolic traditions, being God-given revelation (2 Thessalonians 2.15). Clearly, Paul is speaking here of the last of these. This divine truth had been handed to them (cf. 2 Timothy 2.2) – which truths they had ‘held fast’ with a ‘strong grip’. The word “keep” was used to describe the pilot who steered the direction of a ship, keeping it on course. A strong grip on the teaching and principles of Scripture will keep our spiritual lives firmly on track! Note. We can easily develop *ecclesiastical* traditions – practices and interpretations which have been introduced and then accepted over a long period of time, not necessarily having apostolic authority.

Theological: Principle of Headship [vv.3-6]

v.3: “I would have you know” suggests Paul is trying to help the Corinthians understand (*oida*) the reasons for the accepted and universal church practice of head covering. Christians should not only *do* what is right but know *why* they do it – such an understanding brings *delight* rather than *drudgery* in obedience.

As previously noted, the word “head” is *kephalē*. It refers to a person’s physical head (e.g. Matthew 10.30; 14.8), but *figuratively* signifies a person in authority over another – as the head is the uppermost part of the human body. In the LXX, the word often refers to a leader or chief in a position of responsibility for others (e.g. Judges 11.11; 2 Samuel 22.44). The word does not demand inequality or inferiority. It concerns differing roles and responsibilities between the parties involved and *willing* subjection to another’s will. Headship is a matter of divine *order*. Submission to authority pervades the universe – there would be catastrophe without it. If Christ had not submitted to the will of God, redemption would not have been accomplished. If employees do not submit to their supervisors, the business would collapse. If wives do not submit to their husbands, the family unit is weakened or broken. Some say *kephalē* means “source”, but in over 50 examples of the expression in ancient Greek literature (and many uses in LXX), the metaphorical thought of authority is always present. It certainly would not be acceptable to say that God is the “source” of Christ. In this passage, the word is used *literally* (v.4), *metaphorically* of authority and control (v.3; Ephesians 1.22) and *representatively* of the whole person (vv.4-5, cf. Acts 18.6; Romans 12.20).

Paul presents a hierarchy of headship involving different persons and covering different spheres. David Gilliland notes, “God is seen to be a God of order; as Governor of the universe He has established an order of headship as outlined in this verse. He is supreme in this pyramid of administration and stands in ultimate authority. Subject to His authority is Christ, subject to Christ is man, and subject to man is woman.” He adds, “before the woman is told that the man is her head, the man is reminded that he himself has a head, even Christ. Therefore, the man’s authority is not autocratic or absolute, for he is under authority to Christ.”

- Head of every man is Christ. The Head of every male person is Christ, whether it is *realised* or not, *acknowledged* or not (cf. Hebrews 2.8). Most of mankind does not accept the authority of Christ – those who willingly submit to Him are true believers and act, at all times, with reference to His authority.
- Head of the woman is the man. As to her *person*, she is his equal, but in *position*, according to divine order, she is subject to the authority of the man. Many women are far superior to men in a variety of ways, but God's design for society, the assembly, and the home is for males to be in a position of leadership. This should not be irksome for a woman, because his guiding principle is love. The husband should act towards the wife as Christ to the church (Ephesians 5.25). Then it is a simple delight to willingly submit to such caring leadership. John Riddle notes, *"This does not mean that the woman is not subject to Christ in the same degree as the man, but that she shows her subjection to Christ in her subjection to the man in the assembly."*
- The ESV translates "wife" and "husband" – a *possible* but faulty translation. See v.12, for example, where it could hardly be said that the 'husband is born of the wife'. It should be noted that the ESV reverts to 'man' and 'woman' here. If only wives are in view, then unmarried women would fall outside the headship of the man, and be headless!
- Head of Christ is God. This statement ensures no inferiority or inequality can be implied in the principle of headship. Christ was always subject to the authority and direction of the Father's will – which was also His will (cf. John 5.30; 8.29). Thus, it was the Father who sent, and the Son who was sent. We must not confuse roles within the Godhead. It was not the *Father* who left His throne or died on the cross. Christ's recognition of headship put a crown of thorns on His brow. So, it shouldn't be irksome for a sister to be covered in recognition of the same principle.

v.4: "Praying or prophesying" seems to be a *synecdoche* (a figure of speech in which a *part* is made to represent the *whole*) for participating in an assembly meeting. When a brother prays or prophesies audibly, he does so on behalf of the company – and indeed the whole company is viewed as participating with him. At Corinth, not everyone could speak in tongues or prophesy but the whole assembly was involved (see 14.1, 23-24)! "Praying" is speaking to God whereas "prophesying" is speaking *for* God. NT prophets were gifted (enabled) of the Spirit to speak directly from God – it was a form of inspired speech. With the word of God now complete, there is no new revelation today. Thus, the emphasis falls on teachers who expound the written word of God. If Paul was speaking to us today, he may well say "every man praying or *preaching*". Note the emphasis (by first mention) on prayer.

The word "covered" in v.4 is *kata kephalēs*, meaning 'down from the head' and in vv.5-7 is *katakalúptō* which means to 'cover down upon' and refers to an external cloth covering. The male is **not** to be 'covered down upon' lest he shame his head. The female **is** to be 'covered down upon' lest she shame her head (v.5). The head covering mentioned here must be distinguished from the natural covering supplied by nature (cf. v.15 where a different word *peribólaion* is used – suggestive of covering the *body*, not merely the *head*). The head covering is not defined other than by its function – it must be a covering, the word coming from a common verb meaning to 'conceal' or 'hide'. Nothing in relation to form, size, colour or material is stated. But clearly a ribbon or bow, even a lace covering through which the head is visible would hardly be adequate. *"On the other hand, it must be said that a spectacular, eye-catching hat complete with bows, brims and blossoms will be equally out of place. It is to be feared that in many instances such pieces of fashion, instead of being symbols of a woman's submission, are in fact stylish symbols of status, and even show!"* Some historians suggest Roman men (Corinth was a Roman colony) sometimes pulled the loose folds of their toga over their heads as an act of piety in the worship of pagan gods.

For a male to be covered in the assembly was to "dishonour (to bring shame or fail to respect) his head". The critical question is whether the word "head" is to be taken *literally* – he brings shame on himself, or *metaphorically* – he brings shame on his Head which is Christ. The answer seems to be **both** – linking backwards to the *metaphorical* head (v.3) and forwards to the parallel verse (v.5) where the woman brings shame on *herself* by not wearing a covering for it equates to being "shaven".

- How does he *disgrace himself*? By covering his physical head, he takes a place of subjection and thereby refuses the position of leadership (headship) God has given him. He makes a woman of himself.
- How does he *dishonour Christ*? In taking a place of subjection he thereby acknowledges a *visible* head here on earth, and in so doing, he dishonours (and denies) his *invisible* Head in heaven.

There is a hint here which will help answer several questions. Those who come under the command to be uncovered (males) or covered (females) are in assembly fellowship as they are participating corporately in praying and preaching. In addition, many local churches have introduced 'gatherings' which are not mentioned in the NT, e.g. a children's meeting. But as long as the purpose of such gathering is spiritual, and there is public praying and/or preaching, then the principles of this passage must be upheld.

v.5: The thought of a woman “praying or prophesying” presents an obvious tension with **14.34**, “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak”. If we accept the statement as a *synecdoche* for corporate participation in the assembly gatherings, then the tension is solved as this was silent participation on the part of the females. Alternatively, it *could* be that females were indeed praying and prophesying audibly in Corinth – no doubt boasting their Christian liberty and equality (Galatians **3.28**). If so, this verse might almost suggest it was permissible for the woman to take public part as long as she was covered – but this is not the case. Paul is dealing with each problem in a logical order. He *first* teaches the principle of headship – emphasising the need to wear a symbol of submission (which implies that silence is fitting) before, *secondly*, taking the relatively small step to command “silence” in the corresponding latter part of the chiasm (**14.34**). In any case, **14.34** is the final, imperative word from the apostle – the *latter* statement always clarifying the *former* (**11.5**). Please note that Paul has used the same pattern in the preceding section (**8.1-11.1**). Thropay explains, “Paul addresses only one issue in 1 Corinthians **8**; that of Christian liberty. It seems that a believer *may* eat food that has been sacrificed to idols, so long as eating it does not cause a brother to stumble... From **10.14**, Paul shows that there is *another* issue at stake. To associate with idolatry is to associate with demons. Therefore, we should *not* even consider eating things offered to idols, **10.20-23**. By thus attacking the problem in steps, Paul was able to focus on each issue separately and present one principle at a time.”

For a female to pray or prophesy with “her head uncovered” in the assembly was to “dishonour (*bring shame or fail to respect*) her head”. Again, as above, “head” is to be taken *literally and metaphorically*.

- How does she *disgrace herself*? By uncovering her physical head, she is denying and refusing her God-given place of subjection. She is making a man of herself and seeking to usurp his place. Paul says this is “even all one” or ‘equivalent to’ having a shaved head. Apparently, the only females in Corinth with shaven heads were slaves, adulteresses (cf. Numbers **5.11-31**) and prostitutes. Such a person was a disgrace to womanhood.
- How does she *dishonour the man*? In taking a place of authority she thereby acknowledges no *visible* head here on earth, and in so doing, she dishonours (and denies) the headship of the man, and by proxy, the headship of Christ (whom the male represents). It is parallel to the shame an adulterous woman (with shaved head) would bring on her husband.

v.6: If a woman *persisted* in uncovering her head (present continuous tense), she should be consistent and remove the permanent, natural symbol of that subjection too. Let her be “shorn”, like the shearing of a sheep (a Grade 1 haircut, cf. Acts **8.32**; **18.18**) or “shaven” – clean-shaven, completely bald. But such an act would class her with the immoral women of Corinth. She should, therefore, be consistent and wear either *both* coverings or *none at all*. This verse exposes the lie (based on v.15), that a woman’s hair is a sufficient covering in the assembly. If “covering” means hair then this verse would read, “If the woman has no hair, let her cut her hair” which is nonsensical. This position is endorsed by the NIV footnote.

Creatorial: Pattern of Headship [vv.7-9]

v.7: Paul shows that the principle of headship is a matter of divine order that is rooted in creation, not culture. This is not a *cultural* matter for Corinth, but a *creatorial* matter for **all** churches (v.16). The word “ought” means this is not a matter of *conscience* or *choice* but clear *commandment*. It is a necessary obligation.

The man is presented as the “image” (representation) and “glory” (exaltation) of God. The man is the “glory of God”, for not only is he to render *honour* and *praise* to Him, but *God alone* is his source and origin. The woman is the “glory of the man” since she derives her existence, in part, to the man as well as to God. The man, who was made first, honours God by exercising his divinely appointed position of *headship*. The woman, made second, honours the man by submitting to her God-given role of *helpership* – she is a complement to the man in his position of leadership. She glorifies the man by taking her proper place. The man displays the glory of headship by his uncovered head. The woman displays the glory of helpership by her covered head. David Gilliland says, “*God-given glory is not to be covered. There is nothing in this passage about glory covered. If all glories are to be covered then the woman must cover her hair as well as her head.*”

v.8: Both this verse and the next function as a short parenthesis, introduced to support the commands of v.7 (the man “ought not” be covered) and v.10 (the woman “ought” to be covered). As to **origin**, the man was “not of” (*ek*) or ‘out from’ (as a source) the woman, but the woman was “of” the man. **v.9:** As to **purpose**, the man was not created “for” the sake of the woman, but the woman “for” the sake of the man (Genesis **2.18**). The woman was created to assist the man in their exercise of dominion over the creation. In summary, since woman was created *from* man and *for* man, she is his “glory” (v.7), and he is her “head” (v.3). By implication, since man was created *from* and *for* God/Christ, he is God’s glory (v.7), and Christ is his Head (v.3).

Symbolical: **Priority** of Headship [v.10]

v.10: This command for the *woman* is the complement of the command to the *man* (v.7), both supported by the intervening clauses (vv.8-9). Her position in the hierarchy of headship demands that she honours the man by having “power (authority) on her head”, that is, a *sign* or *symbol* of being under authority. An interesting parallel is found in Numbers 6.7 where the Nazarite has “his separation to God on his head” – referring to his long hair as the symbol of his separation (vow). A further reason is advanced for the wearing of an artificial covering – “because of the angels”. Clearly headship is a principle which touches heaven as well as earth. Angels cover themselves in the presence of God (Isaiah 6.1-3, the same word, *katakalyptō*, is used in LXX) – they would expect nothing less of saints doing the same. Not only are angels interested spectators of the sufferings of the people of God (1 Corinthians 4.9), but they are also admirers of the order in God’s assembly (Ephesians 3.10).

Creatorial: **Pattern** of Headship [vv.11-12]

v.11: Lest there be any misunderstanding of vv.7-9, Paul qualifies his teaching by assuring “*that the woman’s submission does not in any way suggest inferiority or inequality*”. Men and women are not independent of one another, in fact they are *interdependent* and ought to honour and respect one another. Male and female *need* and *complement* one another especially “in the Lord” – the sphere to which every believer belongs, and in which the Lordship and authority of Christ is recognised. It is a call for *unity* and *equality* amongst the sexes. Though their differing roles are distinct, each is equally valued and appreciated. **v.12:** Further emphasising the mutual interdependence of male and female, though the first woman was (out) “of” (*ek*) the man in *creation*, ever since every man has been “by” (*dia*) the woman through *procreation*. Every man owes his existence to a woman. Indeed, all things find their ultimate source in God.

Natural: **Propriety** of Headship [vv.13-16]

v.13: Finally, the apostle invites his readers to make a moral judgment of their own (cf. Luke 7.43). Paul was confident their inner sense of right and wrong would lead them to agree with him! If they judged rightly, they would discern it was not “comely” (morally *proper* or *fitting*) for a woman to pray “unto God” (solemnity) with an uncovered head. **v.14:** Paul appeals to “nature” – a safe guide as the laws of nature were created by God. He does not appeal to local *custom*, *culture* (society) or *fashion*! Naturally, men *have* and instinctively *prefer* short hair. Women *have* and instinctively prefer long hair in comparison. Academic Kurt Stenn says, “[It is] almost universally culturally found that women have longer hair than men.” So, nature teaches, as a general rule, long hair on a man is a “shame” (dishonour) to him. Interestingly, it was whilst at Corinth the apostle had let his own hair grow long as a visible sign of the Nazarite-like vow he had taken (Acts 18.18). But such a symbol of consecration to God was temporary and exceptional. The length of the “long hair” is not defined, neither should it be, but there must be a distinction between the sexes. God expects men to look like men, and women to look like women. This applies to dress as well as hair. **v.15:** Conversely, “if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her”. Literally the Greek reads, ‘if she wear her hair long’. The word “if” may imply that not *all* women (for medical or genetic reasons) can grow long hair. There is a difference between such a case and a woman who has chosen to cut her hair short. The apostle is not commanding Christian women to *have* long hair – he is taking for granted they *do* have long hair! This long hair is a “glory” (honour) to her (in contrast to the shameful shaven head, v.6), for it displays the *dignity* and *distinction* of her womanhood and is a natural symbol of her subjection. Short hair robs a woman of the dignity of womanhood. Long hair robs a man of the dignity of manhood.

In a statement which has confused many, Paul says “for her hair is given her for a covering”. This does not mean her hair is the only required covering in the assembly. In vv.5-7 Paul used the word *katakalyptō* which means to ‘cover down upon’ and refers to an external cloth covering. Here the word is *peribolaion* which describes something ‘flung around’ like a cloak (cf. Hebrews 1.12). Her long hair is a *natural* covering “given her” by God as a permanent symbol of subjection in the natural sphere. When she steps into the *spiritual* sphere in the assembly, she puts on an additional artificial covering to confirm what God has given in creation. The argument is simple. Just as a woman’s natural head covering distinguishes her from man in the natural world, her artificial head covering does so in the assembly. Why does the woman need to add another covering? That her own will may have part in her acknowledgement of subjection. God expects her to wear a *double* covering, He adorns her with the first and looks to her to adorn herself with the second.

v.16: Perhaps the apostle expected some resistance among certain individuals to his teaching! The word “contentious” (lit. ‘lover of strife’) describes a person showing an inclination to *argue* rather than *accept* the word of God. He says “we” (apostles) “have no such custom” (practice) – i.e. that which the contentious are advocating, and the argument has been combatting – women praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered! It was not only the apostles but also all the “churches of God” that had no other practice. “*The apostle was not asking the Corinthian assembly to do something not being practised in any other assembly. He recognised the fellowship of assemblies which followed apostolic order and encouraged the Corinthians to keep in line with such companies*” (Gilliland).