

Our passage for today is considered by many commentators to be one of the most difficult in the New Testament. The differences arise from the multiple meanings of the Greek word for “head” and the words used for “man” and “woman” which can also mean husband and wife. But by using other Scripture to interpret these words I think we can get at Paul’s intended meaning. The other problem is that this is a custom of the time. How do we apply it to our day? We will attempt to draw out the eternal truths to live by.

Paul has been encouraging the Corinthians to follow his example in preferring others above himself (1 Corinthians 11:1ⁱ). Unlike the culture of Corinth, Paul was not out to make a name for himself, but rather striving to live in such a way that others could hear His message of saving grace in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 10:33ⁱⁱ). He set aside his rights so that he would not stumble any one or hinder them from hearing and receiving the message. He was not living for himself but for His Lord for whom he had given up everything (Philippians 3:8ⁱⁱⁱ). In this passage he continues to encourage them to do the same in the manner in which they worship.

² Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 The traditions Paul praises them for keeping were those passed down by the apostles, traditions regarding the work and ministry of Jesus, the ways the church was to behave in this fallen world, and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In many ways they did follow them in a manner consistent with Paul’s teachings, though some of them had been distorted.

This verse begins a section on the subject of worship in the church that will continue through chapter 14. He is about to mention one of those traditions, head coverings and women's role in the church. The shift in thought from the previous passage is from how they act toward unbelievers to how they behave in times of worship together. But what is similar to the previous passage is that their behavior in worship may potentially stumble an unbeliever or a new believer. The underlying theme is still about putting others first.

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. 1 Corinthians 11:3 God has established order in the universe. There are authority levels ordained by God. Jesus submitted Himself to the Father (John 5:19^{iv}30^v). Man is to submit himself to Christ (1 Peter 1:2^{vi}). Women are to be submissive to their husbands. *The woman (wife) is equal in essence but subordinate to the man (husband) in function and role.*^{vii}

The world today does not like this design of God, but even secular surveys show women in general are happier if they raise their children while submitting to their husband. Ephesians 5:24^{viii} says wives should submit to their husbands in everything like the church submits to Jesus. And the balance to the wife's submission is that the husband is to love his wife like Jesus loves the church, laying down his life for her (Ephesians 5:25^{ix}). Then his leading will be gentle, gracious, and loving. Our culture has completely rejected this, and that is one reason why our divorce rate is so high. Women want to lead, and the man feels disrespected. Men refuse to give themselves to their wife in service and love, and the wife feels unloved. **Neither has a soul satisfied in Christ, so they demand too much from one another.** The hearts grow colder, and the marriage vows are broken as each seeks another person to meet the longing in their heart. Then in their unfaithfulness

to one another, the picture of marriage representing Christ and the church turns into one of idolatry and unfaithfulness (Ephesians 5:32^x; Malachi 2:14^{xi}).

Lest we put too much blame on wives, notice that in this passage Paul starts here with the man submitting to Christ. If that is the case, the Christian woman will find it much easier to submit to her husband, for he will be loving her like Christ loves the church. We will see the equity in the relationship later in this passage.

We have the perfect example of submission in the way Jesus submitted His will to the Father. As a human, He had His own will. He would have chosen some other way to save us, but He surrendered His will to the Father just as He did every day of His life on earth. The daily "not my will but yours be done" prepared Him for the final one (Luke 22:42^{xii}).

Some commentators (example Leon Morris) make a case that this word "head" should be rendered "source." He claims the word was not used in the first century in the same way that we do implying authority. But then we have the other uses in the New Testament that seem to clearly imply authority. What does it mean when the Scriptures declare Christ is the head of the church? Certainly, He is the source of the church, but is that all? It is true that the ancients did not understand that the head was the center of thought and emotions. Nevertheless, they knew the head sees, hears, and speaks (giving direction and instruction). Changing the word "head" to "source" does not eliminate the order that is presented in these verses. We should be careful not to appeal to modern culture but rather to interpret Scripture with Scripture.

⁴ *Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head,* 1 Corinthians 11:4 Verses four to seven tell us that how one worships can bring honor or shame to one's respective spiritual head. Paul equates the order and purpose of creation to the form we take in worship. Because man is created first and given headship over creation, he is not to cover his head. This is the opposite of the Jewish and Roman cultures in which men cover their heads when they pray or sacrifice. In addition, the elite men in Greek culture sometimes wore a fancy headdress indicating their status in society. Paul is once again counter cultural. He sees redeemed man as the primary image and glory of God in creation (verse 7). In that role his physical head should not be covered because it misrepresents his God given position in the earth. This is what is behind the suggestion for men not to wear a hat in the worship service.

This passage is one our society would say was cultural and should be ignored. But let us look at the truth behind it. God has made the sexes interdependent (That is what verse 11 tells us.) Man needs a helper (Genesis 2:18^{xiii}). He is to lead under the leadership of Christ. His wife helps him, and together they share in the accomplishments. When roles are reversed, the man does not have his primary need of respect met. That makes it harder for him to love his wife which is her primary need. The home becomes a place of tension as each spouse seeks to have their need met.

Entertainment today portrays fathers as weak and often wrong. Perhaps that is a reflection of society because so many are not under the headship of Christ. The phrase "toxic masculinity" is bantered about as if it is evil to be male. There have always been bad examples of man abusing his power and authority. That is not because he is male, but rather because we are fallen. The only answer to this cultural decline is for the men to return to submission to Jesus. That is the only way we will exhibit the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23^{xiv}), and those fruits are desperately needed for any marriage to be

healthy and God honoring, or for any organization to be healthy as well. God given lines of authority are for the purpose of bringing glory to God.

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. 1 Corinthians 11:5,6 In the culture of that day, most of the Greek and Roman women covered their heads. It is still the same in much of the middle east. Prostitutes were the exception to the rule. In Corinth, however, this was being tested. Women were rejecting head coverings and even competed in the Isthmian games. One woman even won the war chariot race. Apparently, the women in the church were tempted to follow this trend reasoning that “all things were lawful” (1 Corinthians 10:23^{xv}). But that did not set a good example of modesty of that culture for new believers or those unbelievers who visited the church.

The word used for “wife” here in ESV can mean either a woman or a wife. The woman's head covering at that time showed not only her modesty but that she is in submission to her role as a helpmeet. That is what gives her authority. Submitting to God’s order is where all real authority comes from (1 John 5:14^{xvi}). It is in this order that she prays or prophesies in the church. We will see in chapter 14 that prophecy is judged by others, which ultimately ends in the authority of the elders of the local church.

A woman uncovering her head was so suggestive that Paul said it was the same as if her head was shaved. A shaved head on a woman was meant to be a humiliation. God gave women, as a part of their beauty, lovely hair. If the woman stepped out of her created order it was a humiliation to her, her husband, and to the church.

We do not have the same cultural practices today, so we need to interpret this for our culture. What would be seen as seductive or improper dress for a woman who prays or prophesies in church today? We will cover the meaning of prophecy in a later chapter, but suffice to say for now it is to speak forth the Word of God. Certainly, there are some styles that would be improper because of their suggestive nature. This would include any dress that revealing. Does it draw attention to the shape of the body? What the culture considers modest should be the standard. We are all free, but as Paul showed us in the previous passage, we shouldn’t do anything that stumbles a weaker brother. We should consider the impression it may have on new believers and what it says to guests.

⁷ 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. 1 Corinthians 11:7 I understand Genesis 1:27 to tell us that both male and female are made in the image of God. (Morris disagrees and says Paul here indicates that Adam in that verse applies to the human Adam not mankind, but many others disagree.) In stating that men are the image and glory of God, Paul’s point is not that women were not also created in the image of God. “As the argument shows, Paul’s concern is that both the man and the woman are the glory of another, not themselves. Genesis 1:27^{xvii} affirms that all humans bear the image of their Maker (cf. 1 Cor 15:49^{xviii}). The veiling of the woman has to do with the fact that she is man’s “glory.” The purpose of the veil, then, is that people should not gaze on that which is man’s glory in worship since the focus is on God’s glory. Ciampa and Rosner assert that the dress code for Paul was not merely a symbolic expression of gender distinction to be maintained for the sake of respect for the created order but “understood to be essential to avoiding the

infiltration of anything that might distract a worshiper's attention away from the glory of God."^{xix}

Men, we are to live in such a way as to bring praise and honor to God. We are to shine with godly attributes that represent God. But woman was made as the helpmeet of man and is his glory. Mariko is my glory. She is my praise, honor, and approval. (See Strong's^{xx}.) That helps us together to glorify God with our unity. We complement each other. That is why men and women are so different. We are supposed to welcome and appreciate those differences and realize they complete us for God's glory.

Sadly, it is too often the case that we don't appreciate those differences and allow them to be a source of friction. Our culture readily gives up on marriage because of the differences instead of working together for the glory of God. This forsaking of our wedding vows made before God pictures believers' unfaithfulness to God resulting in idolatry. We look for someone to meet our needs and glorify us alone instead of together working through our issues for the glory of God.

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. 1 Corinthians 11:8-10 Paul returns to the order of creation and the purpose for which woman was created to emphasize the reason a woman in that culture covers her head when praying or prophesying. Verse 10 tells us that the covering is a symbol of authority. It declares she is in proper order with God's creation and therefore here prayer or prophecy should be heard and carry weight.

This verse also tells us we have angels attending our worship services. I imagine them sitting on the edge of the soffits discussing points in the sermon and noting who is hearing something that will affect the rest of their life. The book of Hebrews says they are sent to assist those who will be heirs of salvation (Hebrews 1:14^{xxi}). Maybe they are discussing a soul in the valley of decision and holding back any distracting influences. When they see a woman in proper order speaking out in prayer or prophecy, they know it is worth listening to. The order reminds them of God's order in all things and their place in that order.

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. ¹³ Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? 1 Corinthians 11:11-13 Paul inserts a reminder that we are interdependent. Man is not to be independent but works together with his wife. This is God's design and order, and we ignore it to our peril. Our inter-dependency is seen in creation and nature. The woman was formed from the rib of Adam, and man is born through woman (Genesis 2:21,22^{xxii}).

Of course many men do not submit to Christ while the wife does. Peter addresses this in 1 Peter 3:1,2^{xxiii}. The wife must still submit whenever it does not violate a command of God so that through her example, she may win him to Christ.

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. 1 Corinthians 11:14,15 Long hair on a woman is very beautiful. Paul calls it the glory of her husband. It is a covering in itself. Most of the Roman and Greek world had men wearing short hair and women long hair. (The Spartans were an exception.) Jesus likely had short hair. Centuries later He was depicted with long hair in the style of Greek

gods. It just seems natural for men to wear short hair and women to have longer hair. It is not only the glory of her husband but of her as well.

The Brethren churches and many Orthodox churches still practice head coverings for women. Our culture no longer gets the message and in fact dislikes the message. Should we reinstitute this? Or would it be contentious in this present time (verse 16)? It is something to consider. But the main thing is that we live in God's designed order and submission while working together in an inter-dependent way.

I witness homes in which the wife is the head. The husband submits in everything. In the extreme cases I have witnessed, the damage to the children is easily observed. The husbands become weaker in old age from physical problems I would suggest come from the stress they have felt through the years. It may just be my little world. What have you observed? Kathy Keller gives us healthy perspective when she writes, *I am in no way suggesting that women shouldn't have strong opinions and voice them. That can be done without becoming the head of the house.*^{xxiv}

16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. 1 Corinthians 11:16 This is not a command or an issue to argue over. It is not mandatory, and peace is more important (1 Corinthians 14:33^{xxv}). This is an all things to all people to win some situation (1 Corinthians 9:22^{xxvi}). Paul knew the letter would be passed around, and though it may have been a problem unique to Corinth, there may be those who disagreed. If they didn't accept Paul's solution, they needed to come to another one for the sake of unity and order (1 Corinthians 14:40^{xxvii}).

What is important is the issue at the basis of what Paul is addressing. Steven Um puts it quite well so I will quote him: *Paul is essentially saying, "Everyone willingly submits to something. Don't conduct yourself in a way that would dishonor the one to whom you are submitting." Men, don't dishonor God by adopting idolatrous dress in worship. Women, don't dishonor God and your husband by adopting dress that calls your marital status into question. Paul is insinuating that some women were skewing the common cultural practice of wearing their hair or wearing a covering of some sort on their head during worship. They felt as though they had freedom in their worship, which they did, and they allowed their hair to hang down on their shoulders. We must understand that the cultural norm, whether in the church or even in the Greco-Roman world, was for women to wear not necessarily a full veil but a shawl to cover their heads.*^{xxviii}

One commentator writes that, *"The only woman who did not wear them were the hetairai, who were the 'high-class' mistresses of influential Corinthians. Also, slaves had their heads shaved, and the same practice [was] enacted as punishment for convicted adulteresses"; that is, they would shave their heads.*^{xxix}

It was uncommon women let their hair down and not cover it, and it was somewhat of a seductive distraction in the worship service. In my opinion many churches have adopted distracting practices in our day. We certainly have the freedom to dance before the Lord, but if it is done in a sensuous way, men will be distracted from worship and the woman will be dishonoring her husband. Worship should be focused on Jesus, and anything that unduly distracts from the focus on Christ should be eliminated. We are not ignorant of Satan's designs (2 Corinthians 2:11^{xxx}). The way we dress should not unduly draw attention to our bodies.

The example for us in all cases of Biblical submission is that of Jesus' submission to the Father. It was total, and done out of love, and it bore the amazing fruit of the salvation of the world (Philippians 2:8-11^{xxxii}). Certainly, mankind distorts and fails to represent this perfect kind of submission to one another (Ephesians 5:21^{xxxiii}), but it is our goal, and the result is worth making every effort to attain. Love, respect, and submission all go hand in hand. When we refuse the grace of God that would help us express these qualities, we harm ourselves. The old nature is selfish and demanding. Whenever we find ourselves in that spirit, we should fall on our knees and ask God to help us walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16^{xxxiii}). The war of the flesh and spirit is ongoing until the day we meet Jesus. Let us do everything to avoid distraction when we read the Word, pray, and worship together. We need worship time alone and time together to prepare us for the spiritual battles before us and to properly respond to the opportunities presented to us each day. May God help us be faithful soldiers of the cross, keeping our old nature in check, and considering how we can build one another up. We are free to wear what we want, but love for God and one another causes us to consider whether it will bring glory to God. Our guiding question is, "Does this bring glory to God?"

Questions:

- 1 What does "head" mean in this passage?
- 2 Why is order appropriate?
- 3 How did Jesus set the example for us?
- 4 What does prophesy mean?
- 5 Why did Paul write that men should not cover their head when they prophesy?
- 6 Why did Paul write that women should cover their head when they prophesy?
- 7 In what ways are men and women interdependent?
- 8 How does nature confirm this teaching?
- 9 How do we apply it today?
- 10 What is the issue Paul is addressing?

ⁱ **1 Corinthians 11:1 (ESV)**

¹ Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

ⁱⁱ **1 Corinthians 10:33 (ESV)**

³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Philippians 3:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

^{iv} **John 5:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

^v **John 5:30 (ESV)**

³⁰ "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

^{vi} **1 Peter 1:2 (ESV)**

² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

^{vii} C. Vaughan and T. D. Lea, [1 Corinthians](#), Bible Study Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 111–12

^{viii} **Ephesians 5:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

ix **Ephesians 5:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

x **Ephesians 5:32 (ESV)**

³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

xi **Malachi 2:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

xii **Luke 22:42 (ESV)**

⁴² saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."

xiii **Genesis 2:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

xiv **Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV)**

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

xv **1 Corinthians 10:23 (ESV)**

²³ "All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up.

xvi **1 John 5:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

xvii **Genesis 1:27 (ESV)**

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

xviii **1 Corinthians 15:49 (ESV)**

⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

xix Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 28, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 262

xx Strong's Greek word *doxa* 1391 dignity, glory (-ious), honour, praise, worship..

xxi **Hebrews 1:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

xxii **Genesis 2:21-22 (ESV)**

²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

xxiii **1 Peter 3:1-2 (ESV)**

¹ Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, ² when they see your respectful and pure conduct.

xxiv Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), p. 492.

xxv **1 Corinthians 14:33 (ESV)**

³³ For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints,

xxvi **1 Corinthians 9:22 (ESV)**

²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

xxvii **1 Corinthians 14:40 (ESV)**

⁴⁰ But all things should be done decently and in order.

xxviii Stephen Um, *Preaching the Word - 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross*.

xxix David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p. 180

xxx **2 Corinthians 2:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

xxxi **Philippians 2:8-11 (ESV)**

⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

xxxii **Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)** ²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

xxxiii **Galatians 5:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.