

Lake Cities Community Church
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Series: 1 Corinthians "Growing Up. Building Up."
Pastor Craig Schill

"Headcoverings and Haircuts"

1 Cor 11:1-16

Herman Melville was a famous American author who, in 1851, wrote the classic, "Moby Dick". A few years earlier he had written a lesser-known story called, "Redburn," which was largely thought to be autobiographical. The story is about a young man named Redburn, who on the death of his father, boards a ship for the first time and travels to Liverpool England to make a name for himself. In his possession is a guidebook – a type of diary and account that his father had written 30 years before when he had made a similar journey to Liverpool. However, once there, Redburn quickly realizes that the guidebook of his father had become hopelessly outdated. Some of the buildings it described had been torn down and some of the streets have their names changed. Redburn is saddened and disillusioned as he realizes that he must find his own way in the world and cannot depend on his father.

Some literary critics argue that through this story Melville is asserting his own criticism and disappointment with the Bible. In the story, Redburn says: "Every age makes its own guide-books and the old ones are used for waste paper... (the) guide-book has been stripped of its reputation for infallibility".

If that was Melville's view of Scripture in 1849, certainly it reflects the views of even more people today – that the Bible is nothing more than an old guidebook that may have been useful to people living 2,000 or 3,000 years ago, but is of little relevance today.

And, rightly or wrongly, passages like the one we are studying this morning become a litmus test for many people concerning the application of the Bible in modern times. 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 is a passage that skeptics and feminists love to mock, and that Christians often find confusing and controversial. We are going to study a passage that speaks to a time and culture long swallowed up by the passing of history. And the question at stake is - does this old guidebook have continuing application for us today?

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. And as you turn there, let me put three of my cards on the table right up front.

First, I believe this is a very challenging passage! I agree with one commentator who called these verses the “The most complex, controversial and opaque of any text of comparable length in the New Testament” (Bloomberg, 214). And so, my encouragement is that we all approach these verses with great humility.

Second, I will in this message share my view and interpretation of this passage, but you don't have to agree with me. I would humbly ask you to consider my view and arguments – but my view is not the “official” position of the elder board of our church. Actually we don't have an official position on this passage and I don't think we need one. Whatever position you take on this passage whether similar to mine, or very different is fine. I would only ask that wherever you land - you also respect those who draw different conclusions from you.

Third, we simply will not have time to cover all of the different problems and interpretive options in this passage. For those of you who began this past week to dig into this passage - you now know there is a debate in nearly every verse. But, we will still attempt to cover a lot of ground this morning; so get out your pencils and pens, sit up straight, and with the Lord's help we will get started!

Four-Fold Argument for Head Coverings

As you heard in the Scripture reading, Paul's primary argument is that women should wear a covering on their head when they pray or prophesy in church. Women are Paul's primary focus; though Paul also instructs men to not have anything covering their heads when they pray or prophesy. In addition, Paul touches on issues regarding length of hair for both men and women.

Paul advances this teaching with four arguments. The first is an argument from shame / honor (3-6), The second is an argument from creation (7-12); the third, an argument from nature (13-15), and fourth is an argument from practice (16). We will now look at each argument in turn.

Argument from shame / Honor (3-6)

First, in verses 3-6 Paul focuses on how the Corinthians are bringing shame and disgrace through their behavior. Starting in verse four: **1Cor. 11:4 Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. 1Cor. 11:5 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. 1Cor. 11:6 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.

You can see Paul's focus is on the disgrace or shame that they are creating. We do not live in shame-based culture and so it is hard for us to get back into their shoes. In our culture, many people thrive doing things that should bring shame! But in the ancient world, and in some cultures today, the acquisition of honor is everything and to be shamed is catastrophic. Shame was not just an "oh well, we will try better next time," but a deep and abiding embarrassment and humiliation that was to be avoided at all costs. So for Paul to use an argument of honor and shame communicates to us just how important this issues was.

We also begin to see here how complex Paul's arguments are. In the ancient world a common debating style was to use wordplay; and as an expert debater, Paul does that here with the word "head." Look at how many times that word occurs in these three verses. In the Greek the word is *Kephale*. To try to get a handle on how Paul uses this word, Theologian Wayne Grudem once wrote an article summarizing 2,336 instances of this word in the writings of 36 Greek authors from the 8th century BC to the 4th century AD.

What Grudem found is that the same word can have three different meanings: an actual head, or uses figuratively to communicate authority or source. I believe each of these occurs in our passage.

Paul is referring to the actual head in verses 4a, 5a and 6. Men and women either did or did not have a covering on their head. However, in verses 4b and 5b: head is used figuratively to communicate authority or preeminence, such when we say a person is the head of a committee. When the man or women brings disgrace to their head, it is not to their

own physical head, but to the authority they are under (here look back at verse three). For the man, he brings disgrace upon Christ and the woman brings disgrace is upon her husband.

And here is another interpretive question. Is Paul talking to men and women in general or to married couples? It is my opinion that Paul's primary audience here is husbands and wives – although this too is debated. In almost all of Paul's letters, when he uses the generic terms "man" and "woman" together - as he does here - it means "husband and wife."

Back to the word head – it can also mean "source," such as the headwaters of a river. I believe Paul moves to this meaning of the word in his argument from creation in verses 7-12, for example verse eight: **1Cor. 11:8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man.** While we don't have the word "head" here, we have the concept – in terms of the source of life. But we will talk about that more when we get there. For now I want us to see that Paul is using wordplay in his argument and we need to be careful to see how he is using each word.

Back now to our argument from shame and honor. So far we know that some women in Corinth were not wearing head coverings in church, and some men were – and this was a huge issue because it brought great disgrace and shame to Christ and their families.

At this point we need to ask why? Why was this such a big deal? In western culture we have no reference point for how a piece of fabric on a person's head could result in honor or shame. Most of us only cover our heads in January or February if it gets really cold.

And so let's now consider some **cultural background** to help us grasp at least in part what might have been going on – to reconstruct the scenario in Corinth.

We know that women's hair in that culture, when in public, was commonly put under a veil, just as it continues to be in many eastern cultures to this day. Though there were exceptions, to go about, as a married woman in the first century with unveiled hair (or even worse hair that hung loosely and was not tied up) would have been shocking. And to enter into public worship without a head covering would have been scandalous.

It is my opinion, therefore, that the issue behind the wearing or not wearing of head coverings (for women at least) was the issue of **sexual modesty**. (Or immodesty as the case may be). Let me provide some evidence.

One commentator, Craig Keener, in the IVP Bible Background Commentary put it this way, "Women's hair was a common object of lust in antiquity, and in much of the eastern Mediterranean women were expected to cover their hair. To fail to cover their hair was thought to provoke male lust as a bathing suit is thought to provoke it in some cultures today." (Keener, 475).

Another scholar wrote of those times: "Respectable women did nothing to draw attention to themselves... a veil or a hood constituted a warning – it signified that the wearer was a respectable woman and that no man dare approach without risking penalties" (Rousselle and Martin).

One more quote regarding Sunday morning worship from Thiselton's commentary: "Public worship was neither the occasion for women to become "objects" of attraction to be "sized up" by men, nor an occasion for women to offer cryptic suggestions to men." (Thiselton, 801-802).

It seems clear that in that day, in that culture, head coverings for women were significantly tied to sexual modesty or immodesty. I would remind us as well, that sexual

immorality was a major problem in the Corinthian church, and so it should not surprise us that some of that entered into the worship service, itself. And therefore Paul commands the woman to cover her head.

So, I would now ask you to consider this question, **“What in our culture and churches causes women to appear immodest?”** I was at Starbucks the other day when an attractive woman in tight fitting clothes entered the room, and as I tried to avert my eyes, I watched as nearly every male eye followed her every movement in the store. In our culture, how a woman dresses communicates whether she is modest or immodest in appearance. I don't want a show of hands – but how many of you men have been distracted on a Sunday morning, even in our church, with a woman or young lady who has dressed immodestly? I would suggest that this is the nature of the problem to what some of the Corinthian women were doing 2,000 years ago with head coverings.

One more point before we move on – Paul says that if a woman does not have a head covering, she is the same as a woman **whose head is shaved**, a woman whose hair is **cut short**. What does he mean by this? This is another cultural reference to what was common in the first century. A shaved or short haircut on a woman was a sign of humiliation. Some researches have put forward that women brought into slavery had their hair cut off, or sometimes temple prostitutes had short hair. Whether or not that was true, certainly as Fee says, “Having her hair cut short... would constitute such shame that they would be unthinkable actions” (Fee, 511).

As an aside, some people argue that the head covering in our passage is the same as a woman's hair – that her hair is her covering, and not a shawl or garment. But here Paul appears to be making distinction between the two. So I do not hold the two to be the same. Paul is, in fact, making an argument from bad to worse: “If you are going to disgrace yourself and cause disruption in church by not wearing an external head covering, why don't you just *complete your shame* by cutting off your natural covering - shave off your hair.” A frustrated mother might say the same thing to her teenage daughter: “If you are going to dress that, you might as well wear nothing at all!” The point is to cover yourself. Put your beauty under a covering. For the Corinthians – “Cover up your hair!”

Argument from Creation (7-12)

Paul's second argument for head covering is an argument from creation, verses 7-12: [1Cor. 11:7](#) 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. Paul is pointing out the order of creation. God created man, and then from man (Adam), woman was created. [1Cor. 11:8](#) For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; [1Cor. 11:9](#) for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.

Paul's argument is that the one who is created should reflect the glory OF and give honor TO its creator. We have the concept of source. God was the source of man's life, and in creation, from Adam, the woman was created. Therefore man should bring glory to God and woman to man. We see this argument of source in other examples - where children should bring honor and reflect the glory of their parents. As a church plant we will always seek to bring glory and honor to Trinity Fellowship who gave us our start. We have an obligation to

honor and bring glory to our head – that which is the source of life. Or to say it the other way -- neither the man, nor the woman should act in any way that would bring shame to its source of life.

Paul is reminding them that it is **not all about them!!** They and we need to consider how our actions reflect on others, especially those who got us where we are today. This, too, is a common theme and exhortation of Paul to the church at Corinth which we have seen many times.

And so for a woman not to wear a head covering was not only immodest but brought shame to her husband; both as the head of her home and as a man. And for a man to wear a covering was to, in a way, act like a woman and deny the glory God had given to him through creation. Verse 10: [1Cor. 11:10](#) *Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.* So, Paul exhorts again the women in Corinth to wear a head covering.

But what about the angels? Here we are out of the frying pan into the fire. A hard passage just went into the twilight zone. Three possible options¹: **(1)** Some commentators suggest that male angels may be **tempted** to lust after women if they are not properly covered, even as they may have done in the Genesis 6. This would support the view that sexual impropriety is what is in the background of this passage. Or **(2)** it could be that angels are references because they serve as an **example** of those who rightly bring glory to their creator – the source of their life by using their wings to cover themselves (Isaiah 6). Most likely **(3)** Paul is reminding us that our public worship service is very public - and we

¹ A suggestion after I preached this sermon was shared with me that the Greek word for “angel” can also be translated “messenger.” Paul may not have a supernatural being in view here at all, but the messenger who delivered the letter to Corinthians.

have a supernatural audience. If we believe Christ is here in our midst, why do we not also recognize that there could be angels **observing** us; perhaps even some who are assigned to our church as ministering servants. Therefore let us worship in a way that brings honor and glory to God and not disgrace and embarrassment.

In verses 11-12, Paul makes it clear that he is not teaching that one gender is superior to another, which is sometimes taught from this passage: [1Cor. 11:11](#) However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. [1Cor. 11:12](#) 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 goes out of his way with a contrasting “however” to remind us that both genders, men and women, are equal before God. While women were created from man... oh yes, all men were born through women – all things are sourced in, or originate from God. This reminds me of Eph 5:21 where Paul teaches that we are to submit to one another. This also supports the view that Paul is talking primarily to *husbands and wives* in particular and not men and women *in general*.

Argument from Nature

Paul’s third argument for head coverings is an argument from nature: [1Cor. 11:13](#) Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God *with her head* uncovered? [1Cor. 11:14](#) Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, [1Cor. 11:15](#) but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

This passage just doesn't get any easier!! Let's talk for a moment about hair length. We have already seen that short hair on a woman was a source of shame in the first century. What about long hair for men? It is my opinion that Paul is not providing a hard and fast rule here - because even Paul - for example was aware of the Nazirite Vow, where men were required to have long hair. And furthermore I would suggest that we don't know exactly what was considered long or short for that culture. It may well have been that shoulder length hair which we would consider "long" may have been normal in that culture.

Understanding what Paul means by, "nature teaching us," may be the key to this argument. Probably Paul is probably not referring to observation of trees and birds, but rather - to the custom of the day - that hairstyle was a natural way for men and women to be distinguished. How we wear our hair communicates something about us. One beautician wrote in a 2002 book on hair: *"Hair can say a lot about us. It is somehow able to make us appear distinguished, give hints about our social status and financial situation... hair is important to our overall sense of self. Hair has social importance."* (*Hair Care & Styling for Men. A Guide to Healthier Looking Hair, Lorin Shields-Michael, Maura Scali-Sheaham, Kenneth Young, 2002. p.1*)

What Paul may be doing in his argument from nature, is underscoring the importance of male and female gender differences - that they are to be celebrated and not confused. We are back to our concern for sexual propriety in the church. Apparently some men and women in Corinth were causing scandal in the church by fashioning themselves after the other gender.

But, I believe, again the problem must be contextualized in the culture of the time. Long and short hair in our culture, especially after the 1960's does not communicate gender roles the way it once did. Cultures vary greatly on issues of hair length.

The Native American culture has a tradition of long hair for a man and boy – and it is to their honor. In the Chinese culture, up to the 19th century many men wore long hair in pony-tails down their back. When Christian missionaries met with both cultures, they insisted the men cut their hair in obedience to God, based on this passage. Was that right? I don't think it was because in those cultures, length of hair brought no confusion of gender roles or sexual identity. In fact, the well meaning Christians might have caused just the opposite effect – with the short hair bringing shame and ridicule upon the new converts.

But if I said I am going to start preaching in a dress on Sunday morning – the elders might rightly express concern, even if I make a strong argument that in Scotland they wear Kilts and in India men wear long dress-like shirts. In our context it would be interpreted as a confusion of gender and sexuality.

I like the way Dan Wallace, Greek professor of DTS sums up Paul's exhortation: *Paul was not trying to foist a new behavioral pattern on the Corinthians but simply to hold the line against self-indulgent individual excess in the name of freedom.* – Dan Wallace, bible.org.

Again, we should all be aware of the impact of dress and appearance on unity and propriety in the body of Christ.

Argument from Practice (v16)

Paul's fourth argument is an argument from practice and a call for unity: [1Cor. 11:16](#)
But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of

God. This is an important verse as it shows us the motivation behind all of this. Some of the women and men had a hankering for a fight, and they were unhappy with cultural norms and were intent on stirring up controversy. The word “practice” could be translated custom or tradition. We are not talking about the deity of Christ. But sometimes it is the practices and customs we have that trip us up. Bloomberg said: “One should not seek to defy social fashion and convention merely as an expression of one’s own freedom, to do so is to deny Paul’s concern to put others above self” (222).

BEGIN TO SUMMARIZE

Let’s begin to summarize what we have learned by going back to verses one and two. Sometimes Paul ends his arguments with a summary statement, but in this passage he begins with his summary: Paul says: **1Cor. 11:1² Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. 1Cor. 11:2 Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.**

We have been talking much this morning about honoring authority, bringing glory and not embarrassment to those closest to us. Paul says: Christ is the head of the church, I am the pastor of the people. Follow me as I follow Christ. We subordinate our freedoms to the authorities in our lives.

And the people are praised for holding to what? The traditions. Not just the gospel and the didactic moral teachings, but perhaps even a little bit of the traditions of the time – the culture in which they lived.

² Most take verse 1 to be part of the previous section, and that may be. But it also could be argued it is a transition between the two sections, and I believe adds values to verses 2-16.

Their commitment to this pleased the Apostle and it pleased Christ. It makes me think of Andrew and Laura Ruwe, a young couple from Nebraska who I met in India. To respect the very different culture, Laura, on the first day she went to shop and purchase modest clothes that included veils and shawls appropriate to that culture. She could have come and said, "Hey, I'm an American and I have freedom in Christ to wear whatever I want... but instead, in humility, she submitted herself to the normative culture." I think Paul would have been very pleased with that.



Application

Let's talk for a few minutes now about application.

I will again admit to you that many Christians take this passage very differently than I have laid it out here today, and they would find application in copying the practice of the Corinthians and in wearing head coverings themselves, a shawl or veil over their head while in church. Others might contextualize the message a little bit more and say that wearing a hat would serve a similar purpose today. *They argue that Paul's point is that a garment must be placed on the head as a sign of submission and authority.* And if that is the application you draw, though I would disagree with you, you would have my respect, my support and my blessing. I have no problem with women deciding that is what God would have for them; I would only ask in humility that you also respect the views of women who do not come to that same conclusion.

And so with that – here is my exhortation to us here at Lake Cities Community Church, which I believe gets at the heart of the timeless truth and the theology behind the passages.

(1) Women must dress modestly in church. If the lack of head covering made men’s eyes wander 2,000 years ago – today the clothes you women wear, or do not wear can do the same thing. Women, you are beautiful and the glory of your husband; daughters, you are the glory of your parents; but please veil that beauty with modesty clothing!! I am not arguing you have to wear ankles length dresses and high collar shirts, but use wisdom and when in doubt -- be more conservative, not less, in your appearance. Teenage girls, you especially may not be aware of how your appearance can impact men and boys – so be modest in your appearance. Dad’s – make sure that the ladies in your life dress modestly.

(2) Respect and do not confuse gender differences. This passage celebrates the differences of the genders, whereas our culture often works to minimize them. In our culture many men want to be women and women want to be men, and this does not please God. Rejoice in who God has created you to be. Be a man, and be a woman to God’s glory.

(3) And finally, for all of us – Do not flaunt your freedom in Christ. Do not let your freedom be a cause of disruption in church. This has been a continuing theme of Paul: “Just because you can do something, doesn’t mean you should do something.” I am not talking about making a new person, or an unchurched person to feel uncomfortable because they are not wearing “church clothes.” I am not suggesting a list of rules for how to dress in church. But for those of us with maturity, regardless of what the issue is – whether it is

physical appearance, or musical tastes, or politics or one's particular theological bent - let's act with wisdom and with the needs of others elevated as more important than our own needs. Submit yourself and your personal preferences for the sake of love and unity to others in the church.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have brought with me an old world Atlas – 1933. If my son had a geography test and needed an Atlas to study from – he might fail the class if he used this book – as so much has changed over the past 78 years. On the other hand, here I have my GPS – it is only a few years old. But even with this, things change so fast and I am always running into new road and developments and are not in my now-dated GPS. And I don't want to pay the \$80 to update the maps!

But here, in the sacred Scriptures, regardless of your application here, we have seen this morning and we confess together that All Scripture is inspired of God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father,

May we learn from this passage to be a congregation that brings honor and glory to your name and not shame and embarrassment. Thank you for the beauty of your creation for the distinctive differences between men and women, we ask again that you will help us to honor your creation, and not to cause others to stumble. Give us modesty, humility and grace. May we always seek unity and peace in your church. So that before you and before your angels we might bear witness to your gospel and to your grace in our lives.

We pray this in Jesus name,

Amen.