



Here we are entering into 1 Corinthians 11, reading verses 2-16, and if you're anything like me, you might be thinking, "What in the world does any of this mean?" You may be tempted to think that none of this passage really matters all that much, and maybe we should skip to verse 17 where we get to communion. The confusion of this text led me to title the sermon, "Who cares about your head?!" Of course, I title it this way to express the confusion, but to also emphasize that we ought to care. Paul uses wordplay and several examples in order to make a point not merely about our literal heads, but about our view of God himself as our "head." In this text, Paul shows us that cultural norms are not to be ignored, and that we are to be careful to communicate God's truth not only through our words, but also through our actions. In all things, we are to seek God's glory!

Now, as we enter into chapter 11, Paul moves from addressing the Corinthian's behaviors towards the world, and he now turns to how the Corinthians behave towards one another in their worship gatherings. For multiple chapters, he addresses practices within their local church gathering, and in verse 2, we read, "Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you."<sup>1</sup> The word "now" indicates Paul is transitioning, and in his transition, he comments on how the Corinthians do keep him and the "traditions" in mind always. By the way, this word "traditions" here doesn't refer as much to practices as it refers to Paul and the apostle's teaching. The Corinthians keep these things in mind. This is an interesting statement of Paul because we might be tempted to think that the Corinthians didn't care at all about Paul, but that wasn't the case. While they might have strayed or even denied certain teachings of Paul, they did not outright reject him. And, we know that when confronted (based on 2 Corinthians), they adhered to what he said.

In light of this reality, Paul can move into statements about the church gathering in Corinth – in order to address what has gone off-track. He believes they'll listen. But what is Paul saying in verses 2-16. The language in this text can be quite confusing. Some scholars simply ignore this text outright for various reasons. Either it sounds misogynistic to them or antiquated in some other way. Others find this difficult because of Paul's usage of the word "head." When is he literal or figurative and even if figurative, what's the definition of the word "head?" Based on the answers to these types of questions, we can get differing perspectives on what this text is actually saying. What adds to this confusion is that we simply do not have another passage like this in the New Testament. And, that (I think) might teach us something very valuable here. Personally, I don't believe it's wise to build entire theologies around individual passages. If you have many passages teaching on something, then you can have a stronger foundation in teaching something. But if you have ONE passage, we ought to tread lightly. That's what we have here.

Now, on a very practical level, in walking away from this text, you're going to find some people who say that they believe this passage is commanding women (or, wives) to wear head coverings in corporate worship. Others will conclude this passage isn't saying that at all. And still others will say, "Who cares

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:2.

about a head covering?!” Well, clearly God cared, and has preserved this in Scripture. So, whether I find this necessary or not is not the point. It is necessary because God’s given us this text. Therefore, now you might be wondering, “Pastor Timothy, what position do you hold?” Because I answer this, I want to say that godly Christians can disagree on this and still be godly! I don’t preach a text like this to draw a line between who’s a genuine Christian and who isn’t. Or, who’s a better Christian than another. That’s contrary to one of the bigger messages of Paul in the letter to Corinth. That said, I do take a position. And, upon further study even this week, I’m more convinced of my previously held position.

So, let me give you what I think is the big idea, and then I’ll explain a little why: **Wives must communicate honor and fidelity to their spouses in the local church gathering even through their attire.** By the way, Paul is not trying to gain control of or suppress women here in this text. As we work through this, we find Paul even arguing that the genders are interdependent on each other. Nevertheless, this seems to be the principle we can walk away from this text. The point for all generations isn’t women wearing head coverings. The point is honor and fidelity to your spouses. When you gather with a church (your spiritual family), you don’t forget your physical family. You are still married. But you could say, “But men are mentioned a lot in this text, too. Why are you singling out women?” Yes, men are mentioned quite a bit! But they’re mentioned by way of example. I think verse 13 emphasizes the point Paul is getting at: <sup>13</sup>Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?<sup>2</sup> The issue at this point doesn’t seem to be men, but instead women who may be gathering without a head covering.

But does this text not command head coverings for all time? I don’t believe so. And there are a couple of clues for me. First, as I said before, this is the **only place in the NT where this is mentioned.** If it was so important, I would think it’d be found in more places. This to me is kind of like a scenario where Paul says to “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Is Paul commanding cheek-kissing between same genders throughout all time? Or think of when Paul commands Timothy to take wine for his stomach’s sake. What’s the application to us? Do you all have wine when you’re feeling anxious and unwell? We recognize there are places in the Scripture that God is speaking to us more in principle while applying it specifically to a church in their cultural context. And this leads to the second point. **Paul uses cultural terminology in this text.** In this text, we have in verse 4 a statement, “Every man who prays or prophecies with his head covered,” the literal Greek is, “Every man who prays or prophecies from the head.” This phrase can only be understood culturally, and it’s linked to idol worship. Men who worshipped idols would take the loose parts of their toga and drape them over their head in an act of submission to their idol. In verse 4, Paul is saying men who worship the Lord ought *not* to do this. They are not to act like the idol-worshippers. They ought to be different. Well, if we’re understanding the uncovered man in cultural terms, then what does it mean for a woman’s head to be covered in the culture of Corinth? Well, when you do slight investigation, you discover quickly that the coverings communicated something as well. Wives who didn’t wear head coverings in public settings were communicating a detachment to their spouse. They also were aligning with more sexually loose women in that culture. Simply not wearing the head covering, when you were married, communicated this to the average citizen. Finally, **Paul uses an illustration from culture to emphasize his point.** In verse 14, Paul writes, “<sup>14</sup>Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him. . . .”<sup>3</sup> What does Paul mean by the word “nature?” Is he saying that inherent within the nature of a man, we know men should have short hair? That doesn’t fit. If I don’t cut my sons hair, it’ll get long – just like my daughter’s hair. In addition, in the Old Testament, we have men with long hair – not only Nazirites. It’s

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<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:13.

<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:14.

not condemned but commanded for Nazirites to have long hair. God would *never* command sin. So, what does nature mean? Think of the translation being like this, “Isn’t it natural to conclude from culture that it’s a disgrace for a man to have long hair?” This word can faithfully be translated with this idea. And, again, it fits the context in Corinth. The only men with long hair were considered effeminate and weak. So, Paul uses an illustration from culture to emphasize his point. Phew! I’ve stated a lot simply to get back to the point. And, what’s the point again? Wives must communicate honor and fidelity to their spouses in the local church gathering even through their attire.

Why were women not wearing head coverings? We simply don’t know. It could be innocent – for example, in Greek culture, women wore head coverings in public. The church gathered was more than likely in a house church. So, why put on the covering? But Paul says that the church gathered, while a family, is still public. We must take care how we present God’s truth in our words and actions. And, so Paul now brings 4 points to emphasize his main idea. By the way, each of these points could be their own sermon, but I think we would be doing a disservice to Paul’s main point by having a sermon on each because Paul doesn’t want us emphasizing his subpoints. He wants the subpoints to emphasize the main point! So, let’s get into each point to see how he helps the church navigate through head coverings and also to see why this matters for us today:

### **1. The Trinitarian order models honor and fidelity for spouses (vv. 3-6).**

Let’s read verses 3-6 again: <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

Just because they listen to Paul doesn’t mean they’re doing everything right. That’s why we have the words “But I” at the beginning of verse 3. He starts with theology. What is their belief about God and also their relationship to God. The head of every man is Christ, the head of the wife is her husband and the head of Christ is God. By the way, Paul isn’t putting down women. Some think he’s making women the lesser being here, but if that were the case, you’d think the order of his statements would be different. Women are sandwiched in the middle. Paul’s not talking about order of value, but instead he’s emphasizing roles and relationship. We can be confident this is the case because God the Father isn’t more valuable than Jesus. Both the Father and the Son are God. But the Son has related to the Father in a specific way in creation and also in coming to this world to bring salvation to sinners. He obeyed the Father and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. But the Father has highly exalted him! Oh how glorious. Both the Father and Son are involved in humanity’s salvation. If you have turned from your guilt and sins to Jesus who took guilt and sin on himself at the cross, you are completely forgiven by God! You are reconciled with the eternal God! And you have that because the Son obeyed the Father and the Father raised up the Son!

So, again, Paul is not talking here about value, but about role and responsibility. So, what does Paul mean by “head?” This word for head refers to leadership. Actually, every time this word is used in the Greek literature around Paul’s day, it always refers to someone in authority. That’s the role. But that

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<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:3–6.

role also communicates responsibility. The authority is to serve and feed into those they lead. So, Paul says the head of man is Christ. The head of Christ is God the Father. The head of woman is man.

Now, what does this have to do with the Corinthian's church practices? Verses 4-5 answer this. Every man who prays or prophesies with the toga over his head dishonors his head. Every woman who prays or prophesies without a head covering dishonors her head. Now, I want to clarify. The word "wife" here could be translated woman, but I think given the culture of Corinth, it's right that the ESV translates this wife. What we see in verses 4-5 is that we have issues with idolatry and adultery. A man who prays with the toga over his head is still holding on to idolatry. That dishonors Christ, his head, the one whom he is to follow and be an example of to his wife! Jesus sets free from idolatry, and he's not honoring and showing fidelity to Christ by acting idolatrous. The woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered is in danger of being adulterous. Her heart isn't showing honor and fidelity to her husband, which potentially reveals an idol in her heart.

Paul states that if she doesn't cover her head, she might as well have a shaved head! This sounds like he's trying to shock, but we may not understand why it's shocking. Again, this is cultural. In Corinth, if a woman was adulterous, her husband had the right to have her head shaved – which was then a symbol of shame to everyone that she was indeed adulterous. Therefore, Paul writes in verse 6, "But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head."<sup>5</sup>

Ok, so, based on the order within the Trinity, and our relationship to God, Paul says that head coverings should be worn by women (and men ought to *not* have head coverings). Why? Because head coverings are spiritual in and of themselves? No, but because they communicate something to the culture about your head – whether that be Jesus or your spouse.

Now, by the way, I think a very important point that should be noted here is that Paul affirms that both men and women pray and prophecy in the church gathering. Ventura, this is something we ought to be challenged by. As long as I've been here, I don't believe I've heard a woman pray in the public gathering. You might say, "Well, that's your fault, Pastor Timothy." Maybe so, but in reading Paul's words here, I'm led to think that it's appropriate and right to have this happen as we move forward and I want to engage with you more on this. So, if you have questions, thoughts, concerns, please let me know. The reality is that within the church at Corinth, to have women pray or prophecy would have been shocking culturally. In the Jewish synagogues and temples, women couldn't speak nor were they allowed to a specific location where only men could congregate. Yet in the local church, Paul says they are to be there with the gathering and they can speak and pray! But, women and men must do so in a way that honors the Lord and their figurative "heads." So, Paul first argues from theology. Now, he gives a second point:

## 2. God's design for gender roles in marriage compels honor and fidelity (vv. 7-10).

Read verses 7-10 with me: <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. <sup>9</sup>Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. <sup>10</sup>That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:6.

<sup>6</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:7–10.

Again, Paul talks about men and what they ought to do and then women. I find this encouraging because Paul doesn't simply give commands to women, but he shares what men ought to do (and probably are doing in this scenario). But he does this in a way that shows men are to be the example and lead.

But here in these verses we are confused again. A man is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man. Whoa! Is Paul saying a woman isn't in the image of God? That clearly contradicts Genesis 1-2. No, Paul isn't saying that. An important statement I learned years ago is that just because a thesis is true doesn't mean the antithesis is true. Meaning, Paul says man is the image and glory of God. Then he says "but woman is the glory of man." But Paul didn't say she wasn't in the image of God. We have to follow Paul's argument. And with precision, Paul doesn't say the woman *isn't* the image-bearer of God. That would be false. Instead, Paul is emphasizing what the creation order teaches us. To be the glory of God and the glory of man means that we live in a way that shows honor. Man uniquely as a "head" shows honor to God. This doesn't mean women aren't to honor God, but wives are to recognize they also have a spouse, and God stated that women are the helper fit for men. Men need help. They have weaknesses, and God gave them a wife to help the men in their need for glorifying God. This is what Paul means when he says the man wasn't made for the woman, but the woman for the man. She was made as a helper fit *for* him. Perfectly matched to aid him in his weakness.

Because God is Triune, and because God designed for gender roles within marriage, Paul then says in verse 10, "<sup>10</sup>That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels." The phrase "symbol of authority" could be translated many ways. I actually prefer a different translation. And I suggest that it should say "This is why a wife "ought to have control over her head." I don't think Paul is emphasizing literal head coverings here, but the emphasis is that the wife exercise self-control. In an ancient novel, *Metamorphoses*, the main character confesses that he seeks to eye the heads of beautiful women and then he'd go home and sensually ponder them (see Garland, pp. 525-26). The point is that by not wearing a head covering, the woman was not exercising self-control and was also giving away herself to other's imaginations.

There is a very practical example for us, Ventura. Why do you wear what you wear to church? Are you careful not to bring sensual attention to yourself? Do you want to show faithfulness and fidelity to your husband or are you ok with your clothing drawing attention to your body? If you're ok with this, then let's take it one step further. Are you ok with angels seeing you dress this way?

The "because of the angels" statement might sound utterly confusing, but the New Testament teaches us that angels watch us and even participate in our worship. They are to even motivate us in our obedience, and that's what Paul is saying here. Don't dress in such a way that gives seeds for adultery! Would you want the angels, who rejoice in our salvation, to see this? Now, we move to a third point for head coverings in Corinth and for fidelity and honor to our spouses.

### **3. God's design for gender interdependence compels honor and fidelity (vv. 11-13).**

Read verses 11-12 now: <sup>11</sup>Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; <sup>12</sup>for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:11–12.

I think Paul himself knows his verbiage could confuse people into thinking that he thought less of women, and so in order to explicitly correct that potential confusion, he states that in the Lord (meaning here, as people united as believers in the church), we are interdependent. Woman was made from man, but man now is born from women. This is all God's design.

Some might be tempted to think that married wives, though, are second class citizens because they're under their husband. But no! In the church, we all come as brothers and sisters, but this doesn't mean we ignore our spouses. In our roles as men and women in Christ (and in the church), no one is superior than another. We all *need* each other. We need the praying and other gifts of men and women in the church. This is God's design, and just because we have married couples doesn't mean that women are less and men are superior, but instead, we recognize our roles in marriage even when we gather, and we also recognize our need for each other as men and women in Christ.

At this point, Paul asks the main question in verse 13: <sup>13</sup> Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?<sup>8</sup> Paul's made some persuasive arguments. But he's now going to give one more:

#### 4. Carefully communicate through cultural norms (vv. 14-15).

Verses 14-15 say, <sup>14</sup> Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for 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."<sup>9</sup>

I've already explained that "nature itself" is a phrase referring to cultural norms that cause us to think something is natural. Now, right here some will say that Paul is arguing for head coverings for wives because women have long hair. And men shouldn't wear head coverings because they have short hair. That's not the point. The point is that we recognize that cultural norms communicate to culture.

Wives in the Corinthian church could say to Paul, "C'mon, Paul. Who cares what culture thinks about head coverings," and Paul's response is, "Why do you then care about having long hair and short hair?" No man in Corinth would have long hair. They don't want to communicate they're effeminate. No woman would have short hair! Why? Because those things communicate something.

Isn't it the same with the head coverings in Corinth? To put in modern context, I've had many conversations with my children about swearing. They've asked me why a swear word is a swear word. My answer is: culture. The culture has defined those words as swear words, and because they've defined it as such – and it's pervasive in our culture – we will not communicate those words.

The same with clothing. Women and men, what you wear communicates things. You can't simply say that you don't mean to communicate that. You have to ask, "How is this generally perceived?" And ultimately, you want to ask, "Is this to the glory of God?" If married, are you honoring your husband and the Lord? If not married, are you seeking to honor the Lord? If a man, are you seeking fidelity with your wife by pointing to the true worship of God?

Ventura, how we behave and even dress in our corporate worship can communicate – and Paul's ultimately concerned that God's glory is clearly understood in our corporate worship. As I think about

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<sup>8</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:13.

<sup>9</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:14–15.

this text, I think about all the ways we can misunderstand gathering with the church. We wake up, we get ourselves ready, we dress up nice. We look at others and think of how good they look as opposed to ourselves. Is that the focus of gathering with a church family? No! All to the glory of God is the focus!

So, Paul says in verse 16, “<sup>16</sup>If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.”<sup>10</sup> The point here is that Paul is saying that given all of these arguments, the church has not contended with Paul on this. The churches under Paul’s influence follow the same practice. So here, we don’t have head coverings, but you know what ways of dress can show honor to your Lord and your spouse. Don’t say it doesn’t matter. Be careful in all ways to take up the privilege to glorify God in whatever you do, whether you eat or drink or wear something (or not wear something).

And if this is all a struggle for you to comprehend, or you may even be angry with some of what Paul’s said here in the text, I want to encourage you to run back to Christ in the gospel. If you’ve never turned to Jesus, I urge you! He took God’s wrath in your place so you could have eternal life and hope with God. Talk to someone today to know more about what it means to trust Jesus. And if you are a believer, turn back to Christ again and recall all he sacrificed to clearly display the glory of God to you. Now, you and I get the opportunity to display that glory in words, actions and dress to a world around us who needs Jesus.

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<sup>10</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:16.