

1 COR 11:2-16—MEN, WOMEN, THE CULTURE, AND THE GOSPEL

INTRO: How do the church and the gospel relate to our culture and society? At least in the West, in some respects the church and the gospel influence the culture and *vice versa*; in other ways they are antagonistic. The church is not the gospel—but in many ways the church is the embodiment of the gospel. How Christians do church—both how they conduct their worship services and how they act in society—affects how *non-believers* perceive the church and the gospel.

Today's passage of Scripture—1 Cor 11:2-16—raises these issues, and it raises them in a very interesting way. It is a very debated passage. But if we cut to the core, we will find a vein of gold that can transform how we approach the gospel, the church, and society. [READ 1 COR 11:2-26]

PROP: Use the culture to advance the gospel.

O/S: You may be thinking, “Where does he get ‘Use the culture to advance the gospel’ from this passage?” Stay with me as we consider: (1) the cultural circumstances faced by the Corinthian church; (2) how Paul deals with a practical issue raised by Corinthian culture—the issue of head coverings; and (3) the implications of this for us today.

I. The cultural circumstances faced by the Corinthian church

In his writings, Paul frequently deals with issues confronting the church based on what was happening in the culture and society of his day. For example, **chs. 8-10** of **1 Cor** largely dealt with the issue of whether to eat meat that had been dedicated to idols. Just as that was an important issue in the culture of 1st century Corinth, so was the issue of head coverings raised in today's passage.

Here is some important background: In the culture of that time, faithful and modest wives typically wore a shawl or covering on the head. In fact, one commentator says that the head covering was **“the social indicator by which the marital status of a woman was made clear to everyone.”**

That is important because, at that time, there also was a phenomenon known as the “New Roman wives.” They had started casting off conventional standards of dress and behavior and having affairs with younger men. As a result, laws had been passed that regulated women's attire and distinguished wives from girls and from prostitutes. There were even government authorities who were responsible for making sure that female attire was proper. If a wife was convicted of adultery, one of the punishments was shaving her head.

Finally, Paul's discussion of head coverings in vv.3-16 is in the context of people leading public, not private, worship—since he's talking about men and women “praying and prophesying.” A person can pray in private, but one does not prophesy in private. Indeed, in **14:3-4** Paul specifies that **“one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation,”** and also **“the one who prophesies builds up the church.”** So this passage is talking about important functions of public worship.

With that background, let's look at how Paul deals with the issue of head coverings.

II. How Paul deals with the issue of head coverings

We will look at vv.3-16 slightly out of order because I think by doing that we will more clearly see Paul's thought. First we will look at **vv.3-9** and **13-16** where he makes his *major argument*. Second, we will consider **v.10** where he gives the *conclusion* of his argument even though it is in the middle, not the end, of the passage. Then we will look at **vv.11-12** where he makes a major *qualification* to everything else he says.

A. vv.3-9, 13-16: His Argument

In v.3 Paul says [READ v.3]. Throughout this passage the word translated either “wife” or “woman” is the same Greek word, *gunē*; only the context determines whether it means “wife” or “woman.” Bruce Winter, a scholar who specializes in 1st century Roman culture and its implications for the church, points out that **“Because any reference connecting a woman and a veil [or head covering] would immediately alert a first century reader to the fact that she was a married woman, there are secure grounds for concluding that the issue here was married women praying and prophesying without their veil in the Christian meeting.”** Consequently, the context here appears to be referring to married women—wives—leading worship by prophesying and praying, and is not just talking about women in general. That's why I'm using the ESV today—not the NASB I usually use—because the ESV rightly translates the word as “wives” in **vv.3-6** rather than as “women” as does the NASB.

Some people think that Paul is establishing a hierarchy in v.3: God=>Christ=>Man=>Woman. That's not what's going on at all. The word “head” that Paul uses in **v.3** can refer either to the *authority* a person is under or to someone's *source of origin*, as in the “headwaters” of a river. **vv.7-9** give the reason for Paul's statements about who is the “head” of the man and the wife. There he says that man **“is the image and glory...[READ].”**

What he is doing there is looking at the order of creation in Genesis where Adam was created first and Eve was created out of Adam's rib. In his commentary on **vv.3-9**, Gordon Fee explains, **"Paul's concern is not hierarchical (who has authority over whom), but relational (the unique relationships that are predicated on one's being the source of the other's existence). Indeed, he says nothing about man's authority; his concern is with the woman's being man's glory. . . . Man by himself is not complete; . . . He needs one who is like him but different from him, one who is uniquely his own 'glory.'** In fact, when [Adam] in [Gen 2] sees the woman he 'glories' in her by bursting into song ["This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!"]. She is man's glory because she 'came from man' and was created 'for him.' She is not thereby subordinate to him, but necessary for him. . . . Hence he is her 'head' (her source of origin) and she is his 'glory.'" Are we together here?

Note that **v.7** does *not* say that woman was made in the *image* of man. **Gen 1:26-28** makes clear that women, equally with men, are made in the image of *God*. So Paul is *not* saying **"God is up here, then man is here, and then woman is at the bottom."** Instead, he is saying the *order* in which Adam and Eve were created indicates that they "glorify" the one from whom they came: Adam glorifies God by coming from Him and Eve glorifies Adam by coming from him. Paul is then relating this to how wives glorified their husbands in Corinthian culture—namely, wives wore head coverings but husbands did not. It may sound like a strange argument to us, but it would have been perfectly understandable to his original readers.

In **vv.4-6** Paul states that that men should lead worship with their heads *uncovered* but wives should lead worship with their heads *covered*. Why? His references to men and wives "dishonoring" their respective heads and short hair as being "disgraceful" for a wife clearly indicate he has Corinthian culture in view since in our culture and in many cultures whether someone covers or does not cover his or her head, and whether women have short hair, have nothing at all to do with being disgraceful or dishonoring anyone.

- Commentators have expressed different views about why men should *not* cover their heads, but I think the most likely reason is that *pagan* male worship leaders in Paul's day *covered* their heads. That was particularly significant in that culture because pagan priests typically were from the social elite and their dress reflected their social status. Paul is saying: **"Men, it dishonors your 'head,' Christ, to lead Christian worship as if you were leading pagan worship. If you men who lead worship cover your heads like the pagans, you're just drawing attention to your social status, and that is contrary to the gospel where all people—rich and poor, free and slave—are equal in Christ."** Paul's great concern is that men who are playing an active role in the church must not misrepresent the gospel.
- With respect to wives *covering* their heads, Paul argues in **vv.5-6** that for a wife to *uncover* her head when leading worship dishonors her "head," IOW her husband. He is saying that, when a wife is publicly praying and prophesying, she should not disregard one of the visible cultural expressions—head coverings—that differentiate husbands and wives, because to do that dishonors her husband. For a wife to remove her head covering in that culture would be making a public statement that **"I am a 'new Roman wife'; I am not bound by Christian or even traditional cultural morality, and I'm not honoring my husband."** Thus, the women leaders of the congregation would be misrepresenting what the Christian attitude to marriage really is. It's sort of like a wife today getting up to lead worship and pointedly removing her wedding ring and throwing it on the floor.

That is why **vv.5-6** talks about a wife shaving her head. Paul is referring to the cultural practice where a wife convicted of adultery had her head shaved. His argument is, **"If a wife leading worship won't cover her head like any other wife who respects her husband she should cut off her hair like an adulteress, since she's basically saying 'that's what I am anyway'."** In the cases of both the men and the wives who were leading worship, Paul's primary concern is the integrity of the gospel. His arguments arise from the culture but are aimed at how the gospel is being portrayed *within* the culture.

This leads us to **vv.13-15** because in those verses Paul is making a subsidiary argument, not based on the order of creation but on what he calls "nature." He knew, of course, that hair can grow as long on men as on women and that in some cultures men grew their hair long. But, again, when he mentions "nature" he is appealing to the natural, common cultural practice in Corinth. In that society, when a boy reached puberty his long hair was cut off. For a man to wear long hair suggested effeminacy or homosexuality; whereas women kept their hair long. So Paul is simply accepting their custom and using it to make an argument by analogy, namely, **"Since men naturally have short hair, which suggests that, in principle, men's heads are naturally *uncovered*, they should act in conformity with that principle by *not* putting on something to cover their heads; and since women naturally have long hair as a covering, Christian wives should accept the principle of "covering" and act in conformity with that principle by wearing the symbolic cloth covering that signifies marriage."**

In **v.16** he concludes by saying in essence what he said in **v.2**, namely: "this is my practice, this is the practice of the churches, so as I said in **v.2**, "remember me and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you."

B. v.10: The Conclusion

As I mentioned before, the conclusion of Paul's entire argument is actually found in **v.10**. We see that because it begins with the phrase that marks a conclusion: **"That is why,"** or as some translate it **"Therefore"** or **"For this reason."** Paul's arguments from the order of creation and from the culture in **vv.3-9** and **13-15** lead us to expect him to conclude in **v.10** by saying, **"That is why a wife ought to have a head covering when she prays or prophesies in church."** But he doesn't say that. In fact, his wording says nothing about head coverings at all! The ESV and NASB both say that a wife ought to have a **"symbol of authority on her head."** But that is *not* what Paul actually says. He does *not* use the words "symbol of." The Greek says simply that the wife ought to have **"authority on (or over) her head."**

Some people who are pushing the agenda that wives should be subordinate to their husbands say this means that "a wife should wear a head covering as a symbol that she is under the authority of her husband." I don't think that is correct because everywhere else in **1 Cor**, the word *exousia*—the word translated here as "authority"—is used in an *active* sense, not a passive sense. IOW, it refers to a person's *own* power, authority, or liberty that he or she exercises, *not* to someone *else's* power or authority that a person is subject to.

Gordon Fee summarizes what I think Paul is really doing in v.10. He says, **"Paul seems to be affirming the 'freedom' of women over their own heads."** IOW, **v.10** is saying, **"That is why a wife should exercise control—IOW, 'have authority'—over her own head."**

What does that mean? In **v.10** Paul is doing exactly what he has done elsewhere in this book. In the Corinthian church wives in fact were playing a leading role in public worship by praying and prophesying. Paul accepts that. He is *not* putting them down or saying they shouldn't do that but should let their husbands be in charge. Instead, Paul is saying to wives who are playing an active role in public worship the same thing he said twice before in other contexts in this same book. In **6:12** and **10:23** he said: **"All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable or helpful or build up."** IOW, in **v.10** he is telling the wives who are leading worship, **"Yes, you have the right not to wear a head covering when publicly leading worship. But you have to consider the effect of what you do on others. How will they take this? What message are you conveying? Will this advance the gospel or be a stumbling block to advancing the gospel?"**

It's like what Paul said of meat sacrificed to idols in chs.8 and 10: **"I have the right to eat anything I want. But the effect on others is more important than my right to do it. Therefore, if what I do will offend others, or stumble others in their faith, or make a statement that I don't want to make, I won't do it."** So, as I see it, Paul is *not* laying down a cross-cultural timeless law for all women or wives but is saying, **"As a Christian—and particularly as a leader in the church—you have the mind of Christ, you have the Spirit of Christ, now act in accordance with that in what you wear and what you do so that the gospel of Christ won't be misrepresented but will be advanced."**

What about the angels at the end of v.10? The word can be translated either "angels" or "messengers." If it means angels, as most translate it, the statement is very cryptic. In that case it probably relates to what Jesus said in **Rev 1** that in his right hand are the 7 stars which are the angels of the 7 churches. IOW, angels are present at worship and watch over God's people; they have a vested interest in seeing worship conducted well so that the gospel is advanced.

However, I think that Bruce Winter is correct when he says that in this context the word means "messengers." Why? Roman law prohibited associations from meeting more than once a month. Christians met every week. Christian worship therefore could have been viewed as potentially illegal or seditious. Corinth had been founded as a Roman colony by Emperor Julius Caesar and was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia; it therefore had a special loyalty to Rome. Consequently, keeping an eye on strange or foreign religions was important. The churches met in houses; the houses were open to the street where outsiders and unbelievers could come in. **1 Cor 14:23** indicates that unbelievers *did* come in to Christian meetings. In light of all this, Paul appears to be concerned that people in power may have been sending messengers to report on Christian meetings. In those circumstances, for Paul to advocate that women should comply with expected social customs makes perfect sense. The issue is: **"How can we best operate within the culture to most effectively advance the gospel?"**

C. vv.11-12: The Qualification

In vv.11-12 Paul makes an important qualification of everything he has been saying [READ]. This statement indicates that everything he has been saying has not been about wives being subordinate to husbands, and has not been a transcultural requirement for what to wear or not wear on your head if you are leading worship. Why?

The reason is that **vv.11-12** clearly balance and qualify **vv.8-9** which talked about woman being created *from man and for man*. Although that was true of Adam and Eve, **v.12** says all subsequent men are through women. Paul is making sure that **vv.8-9** are not read in isolation. But now he is emphasizing, **"In the Lord we are all interdependent; we are all are equally from God."** Indeed, his whole argument in **ch.12** of this book is, **"We are all one body; we all need each other; and we are all mutually dependent**

on each other.”

That is the gospel view of men and women, of husbands and wives, and of the church; and that is the great transcultural principle of this passage. It is only the gospel that transforms the relationship between men and women to one of mutuality and wholeness, and of equal worth and dignity in Christ. No longer are men to look down on women or use them and no longer are women to manipulate men—but both should recognize their interdependence and equality in Christ. But the only way for people to get to the liberating truth of the gospel is if we use the culture to advance the gospel.

III. The implications for us today

We are all embedded in our culture; therefore, we need to operate within our culture. Look at Jesus himself: he used the culture to bring the gospel. He became a man and was embedded in a specific culture. As **Gal 4:4-5** says [**READ**]. Jesus was not a political revolutionary; he operated within the law—indeed, he perfectly fulfilled the law. Why?—so that he could supersede it with the gospel. And it is the *gospel* that is revolutionary.

What is the gospel? It is that we are worse than we think we are—by which I mean: we all flawed at the root of our being. We can never meet even our own standards, let alone God’s, and we cannot change our own hearts no matter how hard we try. Yet at the same time we are more loved than we could ever hope to be. God saw us trapped in a hopeless cycle of worshiping ourselves and things, of sin and death, so he did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He became a man in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived the life we should have lived and on the cross he paid the price for our idolatry and sin that otherwise we would have to pay but never could. And who he is and what he did were confirmed when he rose from the dead. Jesus is alive today, and for those who come to him in faith, he takes our guilt and deserved punishment onto himself. But he does more: he imputes to us his own goodness and all that he himself is entitled to; he died the death we should have died in order to give us new life. And yet more: he comes and lives inside us, he changes us from the inside-out, and he enables us to be the kind of people God always intended us to be.

That is the gospel; it is the most important thing in the world. It is the only thing that deals with the root of humanity’s problem. Therefore, we need to act in such a way that we can advance the gospel most effectively within the culture. The church should permeate society. It should not be aloof from society, but at the same time it should not be seen to rebel against society.

Does this mean we must do only what the dominant culture says? Not at all. We need to be wise and we need to know where to draw the line. In **Acts 4**, for example, the authorities told Peter and John to stop speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus. To have complied with that would have ended the gospel. So Peter and John said, **“We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard; we must obey God, not men.”** Their response is *unlike* today’s passage where, for practical reasons, Paul did *not* advocate *direct* confrontation with the ruling authority. How we advance the gospel within culture will vary from place to place, from person to person, and from one situation to another.

The gospel affects not just individuals but contains powerful ideas which, as they are pursued and permeate society, will change the culture. The principle behind **vv.11-12** is one such idea. That principle is fleshed out in **Gal 3:28** where Paul says, **“In Christ there is no male or female. We are all one in Christ Jesus.”** That idea has been instrumental in leading to the much greater equality of men and women in lands where Christianity and the gospel took hold than is true anywhere else in the world.

The gospel is powerful; the gospel has consequences. Consequently, in today’s passage Paul is giving us a good example to make his basic point, **“Use the culture to advance the gospel.”**

CONCL: This passage is often read as if Paul is putting women down, which is almost the exact *opposite* of what he is saying. Paul sees that the gospel is the only hope for men and women individually and for culture and society as a whole. Therefore, he wants us to avoid conveying messages by our conduct that we really don’t want to convey. He wants us to do whatever we can within our particular culture to most effectively advance the gospel.

Paul lived this out in his own life. In **ch.9** of this very book he described how he changed his actions based on the different cultures and people with whom he interacted in order to advance the gospel [**READ 9:20-23**]. Now in today’s passage he is telling us: **“You do the same.”**