

**08/17/25      Uncovering the Truth About Headship  
1 Corinthians 11:2-16**

Welcome...

I invite you to open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians. We are studying the book of 1 Corinthians. The central message that we have seen in chapters 8-10 is that Christian freedom, Christian liberty is not self-serving but should be exercised in love, discipline, and devotion to God's glory and the good of others. Our text today is introduced with two important themes: 1) Glorifying God in all that you do (read 10:31) and 2) We must not live to seek our own benefit but what will be a blessing to others and promote unity (read 10:32-33).

**Let's read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16...**

The two tasks of the Bible teacher are 1) to determine what the text meant to its immediate readers in that cultural setting, and 2) to determine what the text means to us now in our context.

How can we determine which Bible practices should be considered permanent and thus relevant for us today and which ones should be considered temporary and cultural?

For examples, five times the New Testament commands believers to greeting others with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thes. 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). Since that was the normal form of greeting in that day, and since that is not the normal form of greeting in our Western culture, it follows that this practice need not be carried over to today.

Instead, the timeless principle behind it should be followed, namely, to express friendliness and love to others. In America a handshake is sometimes accompanied by a hug or a pat on the back but not a kiss. But in Latin America the same principle is expressed by a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Some years ago, I went on a trip to Mexico City where I was hugging and kissing many relatives and Christian friends. When I got back home and came to church, I forgot where I was and I hugged and kissed an elderly woman here on the cheek. Her eyes got real big and she said, "Oh Pastor, you need to go to Mexico more often!"

Here's the truth: in every culture, certain actions, appearances, and symbols communicate something — and in worship, those symbols can either honor God's order or confuse it.

That's what Paul is dealing with in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. Now, this is one of the most debated passages in the New Testament. Some read it and say, "Head coverings? That's so outdated!" Others say, "No, we need to do exactly what's written."

But if we slow down and go verse-by-verse, we'll see Paul is giving us timeless principles on the role of men and woman in the church — even though the cultural symbols may change.

When it comes to Paul's teaching on head coverings, Christians have held different interpretations about what Paul meant and how it applies today. There are three main views of the head covering.

First, there is the Literal, Perpetual Head Covering View: Christian women today should physically wear a head covering (veil, shawl, scarf over their head) when praying or prophesying in public worship. This was practiced in past church history, and the apostle Paul has stated that it was universal practice among the churches of his day.

Second, there is the view that the Woman's Hair is the covering. Paul is not commanding a separate piece of cloth; rather, he is saying that a woman's long hair itself is the woman's God-given covering.

Third, there is the Cultural Symbol View: Paul's command applied specifically to the Corinthian context where head coverings carried a clear cultural meaning inside and outside the church. In Corinth, a head covering symbolized a woman's modesty, respect for her husband, and acknowledgment of God's design for men and women.

Paul is asking the women of the Corinthian church to conduct themselves in such a way that their husbands are not dishonored and disgraced. For a woman to come into a public worship setting in Corinth without a head covering, would be dishonorable to her head. It would disgrace her husband and limit him in his worship. We are back to the old argument we have seen in 1 Corinthians: insistence on one's rights at times may be hurtful to others.

Today, head coverings no longer carry the same cultural meaning. The principle still applies — wives honoring their husbands, and men leading with Christlike authority and humility — but the symbol can look different in our modern context.

This third view, the cultural symbol view, is what the Cornerstone elders believe, and I will be teaching this morning.

**Main point: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 provides four aspects of the timeless principle of headship in the church so that we will worship according to God's design and for His glory.**

**The Principle of Headship Stated in Verses 2-3**

**The Principle of Headship Applied in Verses 4-6**

**The Principle of Headship Defended in Verses 7-10**

**The Principle of Headship Harmonized in Verses 11-16**

My prayer is that we will each think carefully about how we live out God's design for men and women in ways that both honor Him and reflect His wisdom to the watching world, reminding us that worship is not about personal preference, but about displaying the glory of God.

## **I. The Principle of Headship Stated**

Verse 2 says, "Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you."

The Greek word for "traditions" means "that which is passed along by teaching" and can be used in a negative way in the New Testament when it refers to man-made ideas or practices (Matt. 15:2-6; Gal. 1:14; Col. 2:8). But the term is also applied to divinely revealed teaching and doctrine, as it does here and in 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

Despite their immaturity and their many problems, the Corinthian church respected Paul's apostolic authority and divine wisdom, and in some areas of doctrine were seeking to know and follow the Lord's will. Paul sincerely praises them for that.

The basic problem in the Corinthian church did not concern doctrine but morals, not theology but lifestyle. The Corinthians had the truth of God in their head, but it had not worked its way through their heart and to their hands.

And so Paul praises them for their strengths before he again begins to correct their weaknesses—in this case their misunderstanding of male-female roles and relationships.

Before we move on, we should take note of this wise way of approaching others when you have a word of correction. Begin with encouragement. Before correcting the Corinthians Paul affirms and praises them. This is godly wisdom in how we address people especially about difficult things.

In our homes, our churches, our schools, our workplaces, even our friendships — correction should be wrapped in encouragement.

Then, in verse 3, Paul lays down the basic theological truth that will serve as the foundation for the remainder of this section: “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.”

The key to not only understanding verse 3, but the key to understanding our entire text through verse 16 is the meaning of the word “head.” What does the word “head” mean? There are two main views:

The Egalitarian View (Mutualist) say the word head means source or origin. In the creation account, the woman was made from the man’s rib. Her origin or source was in the man. There is no authority between man and woman, thus leadership in the home and in the church should be based on spiritual gifts rather than gender. Both men and women may serve in any leadership role.

The second view of headship is the Complementarian View. In the complementarian view headship means that God has given men and women equal worth but distinct roles.

For example, we heard Larry read Ephesians 5:22-23, “Wives, be subject to our own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.”

In marriage: The husband has primary responsibility to lovingly lead, provide, and protect, while the wife supports and respects his leadership. Headship is not about value — Christ submits to the Father, yet Jesus is fully God. It’s about role and order in God’s design.

In His redemptive ministry, the Son was subject to the Father even though He is equal to the Father (John 10:30; 14:28). Jesus has never been—before, during, or after His incarnation—in any way inferior in essence to the Father. But in His incarnation Jesus willingly subordinated Himself to the Father in His role as Savior and Redeemer.

As Christ is submissive to the Father and church is to be submissive to Christ, in the home and in the church, women are to be submissive to men. You cannot reject one part without rejecting the others.

You cannot, for example, reject the principle of woman’s submission to man without also rejecting Christ’s submission to the Father and believers’ submission to Christ.

Keep in mind that Paul was writing about the relationship within the local assembly, not in the world at large. It is God’s plan that in the home and in the local church, the men should exercise loving headship under the authority of Jesus Christ.

Think of a symphony orchestra. The violin isn’t better than the trumpet, the cello isn’t more important than the flute - but someone has to conduct, someone has to lead, so the music is harmonious. Without order, it’s chaos.

Paul sought to restore order in the church by reminding the Corinthians that God had made a difference between men and women, that each had a proper place in God's economy. There were also appropriate customs that symbolized these relationships and affirmed the difference in gender and roles. This brings us to point two:

## **II. The Principle of Headship Applied**

Look at verse 4...

In the most general senses praying is talking to God about people, including ourselves, and prophesying is talking to people about God. One is vertical (man to God) and the other is horizontal (man to man), and they represent the two primary dimensions of believers' ministry.

While it was proper for a woman to wear a head covering, in Corinth, a man covering his head in worship would be seen as a disgrace, because it suggested a reversal of the proper relationships and blurred gender distinctions.

Notice verse 5...

Paul's comparison of a woman who prays or prophesies without a head covering to a woman with a man's haircut also signifies that the main issue at stake is gender and role distinctions and not merely the wearing of a head covering. Just as it is wrong for a woman to blur the gender distinctions by wearing a man's hairstyle, so too it is wrong for a woman to blur such distinctions by not covering her head while praying or prophesying.

The New Testament has no restrictions on a woman's witnessing in public to others, even to a man. Nor does it prohibit women from taking nonleadership roles of praying with believers or for unbelievers; and there is no restriction from teaching children and other women (Titus 2:3-4; 1 Tim. 5:16).

Paul's point in verses 4-5 is that, whenever and wherever it is appropriate for men and women to pray or prophesy, they should do so with proper distinction between male and female. Every man should speak to or for the Lord clearly as a man, and every woman should speak to or for the Lord clearly as a woman. God does not want the distinction to be blurred.

Regarding the Corinthian culture of that day, Bible scholar David Prior writes: "In first century Greece, dress for men and women was very similar, except for the women's 'head-covering' (here called kalumma or 'veil'). This was not the equivalent of the Arab veil, but a covering for her hair alone. The normal, everyday dress of all Greek women included this kalumma. The only women who did not wear them were the hetairai, who were the 'high-class' mistresses of influential Corinthians. Additionally, the sacred prostitutes from the local temple of Aphrodite did not wear veils. Evidently, some of the Corinthian women believers, in an expression of their new-found freedom in Christ, took off the kalumma. Such action was so likely to be misinterpreted by those inside and outside the church that the apostle Paul directs them to stop the practice, lest their "'head' be dishonored."

Historian Bruce Winter writes in his book *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, "The shame attached to the shaven head of a woman runs deeper than that she might appear like a man. A convicted adulteress also had her head shaved to expose her publicly."

Paul therefore is saying in verse 5, "If you are not willing to look like an adulteress by cutting off your hair, don't pray or prophesy with your head uncovered either."

In the Greco-Roman culture that dominated Corinth women praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered was a statement of rebellion against the God-ordained role and calling of women.

When Paula and I were in Washington state a few weeks ago we stayed at a hotel on a Navy base. Each morning at 7:55 a.m. was the call to morning colors - a bugle is played through a public address system. During this time, military personnel and civilians within the area prepare for the upcoming flag-raising ceremony. And exactly at 8 a.m. the National Anthem was played on speakers all around the military base while the US flag is raised up the flagpole. What did the service members in uniform do? They all stopped, stood at attention, faced the flag (or the direction where they heard the music) and saluted. Now what if Paula and I went onto the street in our pajamas and just started dancing during the national anthem? While I am a retired Navy commander, the symbol of my clothes and my actions would be disrespectful and confuse anyone who sees me.

Likewise, women who refused to wear the head covering in the Corinthian church were only confusing those watching – including the angels. We see that in point 3:

### **III. The Principle of Headship Defended**

Verses 7-10...

The key to these verses is the word “glory.” Notice that Paul does not say in verse 7c that woman is the ‘image of man’ So, what is he aiming for here?

Genesis 2:18 teaches that God made the woman as “a helper corresponding to [the man],” someone that perfectly fits and complements him.

The Hebrew *kěnegdô*, literally says I will make a helper “like opposite” him. Like opposite? Well wait a minute make up your mind! You cannot have both?

But you can, if the two complement one another. Your Bible probably has a footnote where it says, “a helper corresponding to.”

You see two pieces of a puzzle do not fit together if they are identical. On the other hand, they just can’t be any shape. They have to be rightly different; they have to be like opposite. They have to be perfectly complementary.

A woman’s (a wife’s) glory and image was derived from and complementary to that of the man (her husband). Man, then, was God’s authoritative representative who found in woman a divinely made helper in fulfilling this role (Gen. 2:18–24). In this sense she as a wife is the glory of man, her husband.

If a married woman abandoned this complementary role, she also abandoned her glory, and for Paul an uncovered woman’s head gave symbolic expression to that spirit.

David Gardner writes, “Whatever the reason for the head covering in Corinth, Paul’s point is that this created difference between husbands and wives has not changed simply because people have become Christians. The created order should still be respected. In this way, as worship takes place, it is ultimately only Christ to whom glory is given.”

In other words, gender distinctions are part of God’s good design and His roles for man and woman, they are not man-made constructs to be erased.

Verse 10...

While this verse is a bit difficult to interpret, there are three basic biblical facts can help us grasp the main idea Paul is seeking to make.

First, angels, like us, were created to glorify God (Ps 148:2). Second, angels delight in worshiping and serving God (Rev 7:11–12). Third, angels gladly submit to the authority of God in all things (Ps 103:20).

Paul's point is clear: worship is not just human — it's also before a heavenly audience.

It is like being on live TV — you're not just speaking to the camera or to the room, you're speaking to people all over the world you can't see.

Therefore, we should be sure to worship in a God-glorifying way because our fellow servants, the angels who minister to us (Heb 1:14), want to join us in humble, proper worship that focuses on Christ and honors and glorifies our heavenly Father (Isa 6:2–3).

We have seen the principle of headship stated, applied, defended, and fourth:

#### **IV. The Principle of Headship Harmonized**

Paul was aware that his argument to this point could be open to misunderstanding. So, he moves to make sure his meaning is clear. Verses 11-12...

There is no superiority of men over women or women over men. There is a divine design of both complementarity and interdependence. The first woman (Eve) came from the first man (Adam), as Genesis 2 makes clear. However, ever since the original creation acts, every man (and woman) has come from a woman, a mother.

A woman coming from a man's rib was a unique event. Since then, there has been a beautiful and necessary interdependence in marriage, procreation, parenting, and church life. Males and females stand equal before God and in need of one another. Neither exists without the other. We cannot flourish without each other.

Paul had based his previous reasoning for maintaining the head covering as a woman's expression of her subordination on arguments rooted in special revelation in God's Word. Now he turned to natural revelation in support of his recommendation.

Verses 13-15...

By switching to the topic of hair length, Paul is demonstrating that head coverings are an illustration. Both illustrations (head covering and hair length) serve to support his main point — men and women should look different because they are different.

Nowhere does the Bible tell us how long our hair should be. It simply states that there ought to be a noticeable difference between the length of the men's hair and the women's hair so that there be no confusion of the sexes. It is shameful for the man to look like a woman or the woman to look like a man.

Some Bible students translate verse 15 as the woman's hair is given "instead of" a covering. According to that view, a woman's hair is in itself is a covering. In this view women should pray with long hair, not short hair. This view, however, does not explain the woman's act of covering or uncovering her head, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11:5–6.

In verses 5–6, Paul says that if a woman prays with her head uncovered, it is as though her head were shaven.

This only makes sense if the “covering” is something in addition to her natural hair, since being uncovered and having shaved hair are compared as two different things.

If hair were the covering, the verse would read strangely: “If a woman is uncovered [i.e., without hair], it is as though her head were shaved” — but that would be redundant.

Also, Paul uses two different Greek words. In vv. 4–7, the term *katakalyptō* (“to cover, to veil”) is used for the head covering. In vv. 14–15, Paul uses *komē* (“long hair”) when he speaks of a woman’s hair as her glory.

Since Paul changes vocabulary, it suggests he’s making a distinction between an external covering and natural hair.

So, Paul is saying a woman’s long hair is a natural sign pointing to the appropriateness of an additional covering in worship.

Paul anticipates some of the women will be contentious and quarrelsome, so he adds a warning in verse 16 Paul states, “We have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.” According to Paul, the wearing of head coverings was not limited to the church at Corinth but was a custom in all the churches in the Greco-Roman world. Unity in worship practice matters for the sake of gospel clarity.

As in the case of food offered to idols (8:1–11:1), Paul dealt with the immediate issue but also put his finger on the root of the problem, the Corinthian pursuit of self-interest which was unwilling to subordinate itself to the needs of others (cf. 10:24) or the glory of God (10:31). In Corinth, women refusing to wear the head-covering was an act of insubordination which discredited their husbands and the Lord.

So, what do we learn from this passage? Let me share with you five lessons.

First, what you believe about head coverings will not save your soul. The truth is the “head of every human being is Jesus Christ!” Is Jesus your Lord and Savior? 1 Peter 3:18 says. Matthew 11:28-20... You must come to Jesus and He will change your life from the inside out.

Second, in whatever culture we find ourselves it is important that distinguishing marks for men and women are expressed. I think we all know that gender confusion and perversion pervade our culture, especially in the worlds of education, media, and sports. But gender confusion and perversion should not find a home in the church. Our gender is not an accident of biology or culture, but a God-given identity that reflects His design and purposes. Your gender is part of God’s unique plan for your life. He made you as either male or female, and that identity is meant to be embraced as His gift. Gender differences must not be blurred but appreciated, valued, and expressed in appropriate ways in response to God’s all sufficient and authoritative Word.

Third, Paul is concerned that wives acknowledge their husbands as their ‘head’. A Christian wife is to conduct herself in actions and words that respects her husband and respects male leadership in the church. She is not to bring shame on them by the way she presents herself and conducts herself in public, including in the public life of the church.

Fourth, it is clear that women as well as men exercised the ‘gifts’ of Spirit-inspired praying and prophesying within the community of faith, provided they did so under the ‘headship’ of their husbands and male leadership in the church. Redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; nevertheless the New Testament teaches some governing and teaching roles within the church like pastor-teacher and elder are restricted to men

Fifth, the heart of this passage is not about fabric on the head, but faithfulness in the heart to God's order of headship. God's order is good and reflects His wisdom and harmony of the Trinity. Today we have symbols that matter, they communicate truth or falsehood even when we're silent. For example, imagine a wife who says she loves and honors her husband, yet she refuses to wear her wedding ring, will not take her husband's last name, chooses not to sit with him at church, and often speaks poorly of him. Her words say one thing, but her actions communicate another. She would be violating the point that Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 11. Our choices should reflect the love and respect we profess — both toward our spouses and toward Christ."

Ask yourself — In my worship, my relationships, and my daily life, am I reflecting God's order clearly?

Do my actions, attitudes, and appearance help people see God's beauty, God's design for men and women... or do my actions and attitudes blur those distinctions?

When we honor God's design for men and women, we display His glory to the watching world — and to the watching angels.

Let's pray...