

BIBLICAL MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD (PART 2)

“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Ephesians 3:10-11 (NIV 1984)

In the previous session, we considered the wisdom and purpose of God in creating us male and female. We saw how sin affected the complementary and harmonious relationship men and women were designed to have. Through the redemptive work of Christ, however, we once again have the power and privilege of manifesting God’s original intention.

While looking at several New Testament passages giving gender-specific instruction on roles and functions, we briefly considered [1 Corinthians 11:2-16](#), which shed light on the subject of women speaking out in church gatherings. That passage comes in a section of Paul’s letter where he is addressing various issues pertaining to the meeting together of the saints. He later brings instruction on the covenant meal and the gifts of the Spirit, but here his focus is the practice of men removing any type of head covering when praying out or prophesying, and its parallel instruction that women should wear a head covering when doing so. This is what we will look at in this, our final session.

DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,” [2 Timothy 3:16](#)

Some might wonder why we would devote an entire session to this relatively obscure subject. The very fact that most Christians seem to know so little about this passage is, perhaps, reason enough to look into it. More than that though, we are committed to facing and responding obediently to all of God’s Word, and we have a particular responsibility where Scripture commands **practice** (i.e., an established form of practical outworking) based on **doctrine** (i.e., the full biblical instruction on any given subject, presented for the purpose of application in life).



Some things we do are not rooted in doctrine but are simply “practical,” such as screening the microphone at public meetings. Such practices should not, of course, be *contrary* to sound doctrine, and may indeed serve scripturally-directed goals (e.g., in this particular case, that meetings are conducted in an orderly manner by providing guidance to those bringing public contributions). Nevertheless, they are not of an enduring nature and are subject to change.

Practice based on doctrine is of a wholly different nature. The subject matter of [1 Corinthians 11:2-16](#) falls within this category. Our goal when establishing this type of practice in the church is revelation, both individually and corporately, and this comes as we study the Word (see [Psalm 119:105](#)).

Obviously Paul knew that “**All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable**” ([2 Timothy 3:16](#)), but he also knew that not all issues had the same weight or priority:

“For I delivered to you **as of first importance** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,”
[1 Corinthians 15:3-4](#)

Similarly, while emphasizing the importance of understanding and outworking the doctrinal practice in [1 Corinthians 11:2-16](#), we wish to make clear that we *do not* consider it to have the same measure of priority and importance as many of the other subjects covered in this course. That said, let us look at some of the reasons that this subject has been treated as if it had no importance.

KINGDOM CULTURE AND VARIOUS REACTIONS

It is important to point out that, although unusual today, the apostle Paul’s teaching on this practice was accepted by the early Church. The earliest evidence of this is the painted walls of the Catacombs, where the persecuted first century Church would meet. Here, women are depicted as distinct from men in that their heads are covered in worship. The practice continued, in some form or other, for virtually the entire 2000 years of Church history, that is, right up until the 1960’s. However, in recent times, the subject has evoked various negative responses ranging from quick dismissal to passionate objection. Following are some of the main reasons for this:

1. GENERAL IGNORANCE — The first problem is not so much that [1 Corinthians 11:2-16](#) has been taught badly, but rather, that it has hardly been taught at all! This passage is not usually addressed in the teaching of local churches, and any awareness of it tends to be more a product of believers stumbling over it in their personal readings. The second problem is that, due to the recent lack of sound teaching, the Church has been robbed of its ability to refute curious but frequently made “explanations,” such as, “the passage is referring to Corinthian prostitutes,” or “the instruction was simply a cultural thing.” Subsequently, these suggestions are accepted by millions of believers, resulting in a dismissal of actual obedience to the apostolic command.

2. CULTURAL IRRELEVANCE — Those from certain traditional church backgrounds may be somewhat familiar with the concept of head coverings in connection with respect. Some may recall their mothers or perhaps grandmothers wearing hats to church, and most of us are familiar with the image of men removing hats as a sign of respect when praying or singing a national anthem. However, despite these practices having a root in a truth once understood, they are now rejected as meaningless, like so many practices that have continued by way of tradition without revelation.

3. VARIOUS ABUSES — Regrettably, some churches that have practiced head covering have done so as part of a regime of male domination, the devaluing of women, and legalistic control. This has resulted in individuals being fearful of anything they associate with those negative experiences.

4. GENUINE INTERPRETATIONAL DIFFERENCES — We recognize that there are many who share our passion for adherence to the Word of God, but have earnestly arrived at different conclusions regarding how faithfulness to Paul’s original intention might be practiced in the modern church. In our passion to see this passage taught and the practice restored, we are keen to maintain a non-judgmental attitude to those of other persuasions.

5. THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE — Beyond these seemingly rational reasons for not practicing head covering, we would be naive to think that we are unaffected by the worldly culture in which we have been raised. Sometimes this effect is subtle, but can produce surprisingly vehement feelings and irrational thoughts, even among those who are typically balanced and biblical in their approach.

HERMENEUTICS

Before we systematically work through the text, we need to explain the principles that we will be employing as we attempt to correctly understand its meaning. These principles are what theologians call **hermeneutics**, which is the science of understanding, translating, and interpreting Scripture. It is a way of outworking Paul’s exhortation to Timothy to be “**a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth**” (2 Timothy 2:15).

The first hermeneutical principle is that we are to interpret literally what is said. The term “literal” comes from the Latin *litera*, meaning “letter.” To interpret the Bible literally is to understand it according to the letters and words used. Although the Bible is the inspired Word of God, each passage should be interpreted according to the type of literature that is used. Scripture can be in the form of historical narrative, poetry, metaphors, prophetic imagery, parables, practical instruction, authoritative command, etc. Depending on what and how God’s Word is communicating, different responses are required. For example, the required response to a poetic text might be nothing more than joy and inspiration, whereas the required response to an authoritative command is clearly one of obedience.

If a passage of Scripture is written in a clear, straightforward way, then we are to simply receive it in that way. We do not have the liberty to seek for a hidden meaning beyond the obvious and apparent unless there is a clear historical or linguistic reason to do so.

Another hermeneutical principle we referenced in the previous session, and one we will return to later in this session, is the harmonization of Scripture. This is when we consider a passage in the light of the rest of Scripture in order to find God’s full counsel, and thereby obtain greater clarity.

INSTRUCTIONS WHEN PRAYING AND PROPHESYING

In the light of these principles, let us approach this passage of Scripture with an open heart and mind. We will start by reading from the New International Version (1984), then go verse by verse, considering its literal meaning. This will include looking at a number of the original Greek words, and will help bring clarity and dispel some common misunderstandings.

“NOW I WANT YOU TO REALIZE THAT THE HEAD OF EVERY MAN IS CHRIST, AND THE HEAD OF THE WOMAN IS MAN, AND THE HEAD OF CHRIST IS GOD.”

1 Corinthians 11:3 (NIV 1984)



“I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God.” 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 (NIV 1984)

APPLYING HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES TO THE PASSAGE

In accordance with the first hermeneutical principle, we should start by asking ourselves, “Does Paul appear to be giving any straightforward instruction in this passage, and if so, what is it?” Most would agree that, at the very least, Paul is saying that men should not pray or prophesy with their heads covered, and that women should cover their heads when praying or prophesying. Some might feel a little embarrassed to admit to having arrived at such a simple conclusion.

The fact is that this conclusion is consistent with the overwhelming majority of great Christian thinkers for the last two thousand years of Church history. Many of the great leaders of the Church, such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian of Carthage, Hippolytus, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, John Knox, John Calvin, and John Wesley, made strong defenses of the practice in their generations. However, it’s not our intention to teach from Church history, but from the Scripture itself.

Despite this passage clearly being straightforward instruction, it is one of the few scriptures where people, for no immediately obvious reason, will reach for a hidden meaning. This New Testament passage is undeniably written as direct apostolic command and is nestled between two instructive passages relating to the Lord’s Supper, neither of which is contested as anything but enduring instruction for church practice.

Furthermore, the principle of harmonization of Scripture does not alter the conclusion, as there is no other text of Scripture that addresses the subject directly. Therefore, we are left with the question, “Is this one, clear apostolic command enough to require of us obedience?”

EMBRACING ETERNAL TRUTH

It is our conviction that the appalling treatment of this Scripture is primarily due to the fact that it underscores the doctrine of God’s creational design for men and women, and their distinctive roles as taught in the previous session. This doctrine is largely rejected by the modern Western church.



This is not to say that this is only a modern problem. The fact that Paul addresses the issue and brings the instruction that he does is a clear indication that the issue was neither fully understood, nor totally accepted, even in his day. How easy it would have been for Paul to have removed any confusion by dismissing this practice. Remember, this is the same apostle who actively dismantled so much Jewish tradition, even something as foundational as circumcision. An important question for us to answer is, “Why did he go to such lengths as to lay a doctrinal foundation for a practice that would be irrelevant in future cultures?” And perhaps an even more important question would be, “Why would God in His sovereignty allow it to be included in the canon of Scripture?”

As we go through the text, we will draw much from an exegetical study paper, which you can access online with the videos at onechurchministries.com.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16 (NIV 1984)

VERSE 2 — “I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.” Paul starts by commending them for holding to his “teachings,” or “traditions” as other translations say. By this, Paul was emphasizing “apostolic tradition”—something beyond normal instruction, that was to be held to precisely, hence the phrase “just as I passed them on to you.” Later in this same letter, Paul makes the following remarkably authoritative statement: “If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored” (1 Corinthians 14:37-38 - NIV 1984).

VERSE 3 — “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” Paul launches his teaching with nothing less than the Godhead, and starts with the most powerful expression of voluntary submission in Christ. There is no stronger theological foundation Paul could have used than this as the basis of his argument.

As an alternative to the principle of submission, some in recent years have sought to argue that the word *head* (Greek, *kephale*) could mean something other than “authority over another.” The possibility of “source” (like the head of a river) has been suggested. However, to apply this meaning in this text is dubious. There is a complete lack of evidence, both in Scripture and the Greek literature of Paul’s day, that the term “head” means “source” when used in reference to people. Furthermore, the meaning of “authority over another” makes the best sense in all other Scriptural occurrences of the word. To take just one example, **Ephesians 5:23** says, “For the husband is the head of the wife” In what meaningful way is the husband the *source* of the wife?

VERSES 4-5 — “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved.” As we look at what Paul is saying here, it should be noted that throughout this text, the actual type of covering is not defined. What we do know is that Paul does not use the word for the full veiling often associated with Middle Eastern tradition. Furthermore, Paul uses the Greek verb *katakalypto*, meaning “to cover.” This word is used somewhat generally in Scripture to describe the act of covering with something. Therefore, from what we can ascertain, Paul simply required that women wear some type of head covering when praying or prophesying in the church.

In these verses, Paul uses highly potent language. He describes a “dishonor”—actually a “disgrace”—taking place. However, the Greek language here conveys much more than its English equivalent. The person spoken of is continually, persistently, willingly, actively, or directly performing an act of public humiliation, shame, disgrace, and embarrassment to his or her head. It is not indicating necessarily that the person in question is intending or even aware of the reality of what is happening. Nevertheless, from Paul’s apostolic perspective, a public disgrace is continually occurring either by a man covering his physical head, or a woman not covering hers when publicly praying out or prophesying.

This brings us back to the teaching on apostles in Session 12. One of the key gifts of the apostolic ministry is an ability to see into the heavenly realm. For example, Paul spoke of insight into mysteries hidden from previous generations but now revealed to apostles and prophets ([Ephesians 3:4-5](#)). He spoke of being caught up to the third heaven and hearing inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. He referenced a thorn in the flesh given to him to prevent him from becoming conceited because of the surpassingly great revelations he received ([2 Corinthians 12:1-10](#)). Is it not then reasonable for us to believe that the apostle Paul was seeing something that we may not yet recognize?

But why should the covering of a man's head when praying or prophesying be disgraceful, and why should the opposite be disgraceful for a woman? Perhaps the answer lies in God's requirement that men and women appear clearly distinct from one another, and in doing so display acknowledgment of His creational order.

VERSE 6 — **“If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.”** Paul assumes certain things here, like the disgrace and shame associated with a woman having her hair shaved off. Up until very recently, and still to some extent today, the shaving of a woman's head has always been a sign of humiliation. Paul knows that the Corinthians would have understood this. Some have speculated that a shaved head was the sign of prostitution in Corinth, but this is highly doubtful. It is much more likely that Paul is addressing the loss of, perhaps, the clearest expression of a woman's femininity, that being her long hair.

VERSES 7-9 — **“A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.”** Paul here uses the term “glory,” which conveys the idea of honor, and he is again arguing the truths of creation. Notice this has nothing to do with the culture of the day and nothing to do with the Fall. It is original intention, not fallen condition, that Paul is referencing. When we lead out in prayer or prophecy, we engage in a most amazing privilege, that of acting as the very mouthpiece of the church to God or of God to the church. It appears to matter to God that, at this time of functioning with such authority, we do something to outwardly acknowledge Him and our submission to His authority as our Creator.

VERSE 10 — **“For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.”** We should note three things in this statement:

“For this reason, and because of the angels”—Beyond Paul's previous reason for the practice (the dishonor demonstrated by lack of acknowledgment of creational order), he now introduces a further reason—angelic observation of this fact. Because Paul does not elaborate on this point, it has been easy for many to dismiss it. Again, it stands in complete contradiction to the cultural argument. What have angels to do with trends in Corinth? Angels are mysterious creatures, and although Scripture does not give us a lot of insight into the angelic realm, it is nevertheless apparent that a major part of God's agenda is fulfilled in the Church's demonstration to the heavens:

“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,” [Ephesians 3:10 \(NIV 1984\)](#)

What we do know about angels should give us an insight into why our example of responsive obedience is important to them. In Scripture, angels operate under divine command. These incredibly powerful creatures (in [Isaiah 37:36](#), one angel destroyed 185,000 people!) function as messengers and ministering spirits on God's behalf. It appears that an astounding third of the angels in heaven were deceived by Satan when he disregarded his own place in creation and rejected God's authority ([Isaiah 14:12-14](#), [Revelation 12:4](#)). It is also clear that angels and their fallen counterparts, demons, are unable to see into the hearts of men.



However, angels are observers of outward signs, as was most dramatically seen in the Passover. This is when the enslaved Israelites were instructed to put ram's blood on the doorposts of their houses. When **“the Destroyer”** (Hebrews 11:28, whom many have understood as the “angel of death”) passed over God's people, he saw the blood and spared the firstborn. How tragic it would have been for any who failed to be obedient that night, trusting instead in the idea of “God knowing their heart.”

We are given very little direction regarding our interaction with angels. What a shame it is that we ignore this one clear directive we are given for their benefit—and we being the people who will one day judge them (1 Corinthians 6:3)! Perhaps, our disregard of them in this matter may be a contributing factor as to why our interaction with them seems so infrequent compared with that of the early Church.

“ought” — The word *ought* is used several times in this passage. It has lost some of its strength in modern usage, and some mistakenly take it to imply an option or choice. However, this word means “to owe, to be bound by debt or to be morally obligated.” To take these meanings and apply them to the text would cause it to read, “On account of the previously stated reasons, the woman, therefore, is bound by a sense of debt and moral obligation to have authority upon the head.” Choice is not in view. The Fall is not in view. Culture is not in view. However, moral obligation to the created order of God is in view.

“sign of authority” — Despite the fact that most translations use the term *sign* or *symbol* of authority, it is interesting to note that the Greek text is more accurately translated: “the woman is morally obligated to have authority upon the head on account of the angels.” The term translated **“authority”** here can also mean “right, liberty, ability, or capability.” The text says nothing about a symbol or a sign, which Paul very simply could have stated by using the appropriate Greek word for this. Thus, the head covering carries another significance beyond voluntary submission to male headship. It is the possession of her liberty, right, and indeed authority to pray and prophesy in the public gatherings—to act as the very mouthpiece of the church, or even of God.

VERSES 11-12 — **“In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.”** Recognizing the potential for a polarization between men and women if they do not handle rightly what he is saying, Paul now re-emphasizes our equality of worth and interdependence.

VERSE 13 — **“Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?”** It has been suggested by some that, when Paul uses the phrase **“judge for yourselves,”** he is in some way relenting, and is now saying that it is up to the individuals to assess for themselves whether or not to be faithful to this apostolic directive. This is an absurd argument, and would not be put forward by any serious theologian. Paul is employing a style of rhetoric to say, “In the light of all I have systematically laid out, make the right judgment!”

VERSES 14-15A — **“Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?”** The first thing we should point out is that these verses referencing hair length for men and women are not Paul's central argument, and that there is no apostolic command or specific definition stated here regarding what is long and short. Paul is making a natural observation as a supporting argument to his main objective of establishing the practices we have discussed thus far. He is developing the point he introduced earlier in verse 6, that of the importance of clear distinction between men and women, and disgrace when this is blurred.

Here, we acknowledge that Paul's statement is more difficult to understand in a culture where the length of hair does not define manhood and womanhood to the same degree that it once did. However, at the very least, it is clear to us that Paul would consider it to be a disgrace for a man to appear in such a way that he could be mistaken for a woman and vice versa.

VERSE 15B — **“For long hair is given to her as a covering.”** By this, Paul is drawing an illustration from the natural realm to help us visualize the spiritual reality. However, some have wondered whether Paul is saying that if a woman has long hair, that is her head covering. Closer examination of the structure of Paul’s argument proves this to be a completely illogical conclusion. If Paul’s main argument was the importance of women having long hair, why wouldn’t he have started by stating this, and only applied head covering to those who had shaved heads? However, the clearest verse to refute this conclusion would be **verse 6**: **“If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off.”** See how illogical it would be to substitute long hair for a head covering in this verse: “If a woman does not have long hair, she should have her hair cut off”!

VERSE 16 — **“If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.”** Some have suggested that Paul is saying, “If anyone has a problem with this teaching, we don’t practice it ourselves and neither do any of the other churches! So ignore all that I’ve just said!” However, Paul’s intention, in his closing statement, is the opposite of this. He meant it to close down any contention by pointing out that this was not merely a Corinthian issue, nor unique to his apostolic sphere, but was accepted apostolic practice for the entire Church.

PRACTICING THIS DOCTRINE

In our examination of **1 Corinthians 11:2-16**, we believe the directives that Paul gives supersede issues of time and culture, and are aspects of the wisdom of God that we, as the Church, are to display. Therefore, we ask that *when leading out in prayer* (that is, in such a way as commands the attention of others) or *prophesying in public/church gatherings*, men remove any head covering and women wear some type of head covering.

With the implementation of the practice of this doctrine, we have faced some challenges. However, we have also enjoyed great blessings. These have included the following:

1. The peace and joy of having faced a challenging passage of Scripture in a way that is faithful to sound hermeneutical principles, and having established a practice consistent with our conclusions.
2. Greater revelation of the wonder of godly submission.
3. A deeper honor and respect between men and women.
4. An increased sense of authority among women in the realm of prayer and prophecy in the church.
5. Tremendous opportunities to engage with others in explaining the principles of adherence to Scripture, and sharing insights into God’s order in creation.
6. Many opportunities to bring healing to those who have been injured by previous abuses of authority.
7. Constant and victorious confrontation with the spirit of the age.

RECOMMENDED READING

1. “An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 11:12-16” by Christopher Johnson

