



You're Wearing That?

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

What do you do when you don't have any idea what is going on? When the situation you are facing is tricky at best, when the passage you are reading is confusing not just in one place but several, when "it's complicated" is the legitimate answer to explaining the relationship with someone you love? What do you do when it just feels weird?

We like things to be neat and tidy, to be clear. We would prefer that the things we believe to be straightforward, normal, and not filled with tension. And yet we all face times, places, situations and people that are anything but tidy, when all of our assumed categories no longer seem to fit and yet we still have to move forward. We may be able to ignore the weirdness and the uncertainty for a time, but sooner or later it is going to come home to roost.

That is exactly where we find ourselves as we come to 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, a passage that one commentator called "the most complex, controversial, and opaque of any text of comparable length in the New Testament."¹ And like many of the confusing situations we face, it is over something seemingly small that becomes the springboard for all kinds of things that are probably not even in view. The issue: head coverings in church, specifically women wearing head coverings in church. Such a small thing, but one which has had profound implications for dress, participation in church and relationships among men and women (often erroneously) not just in the recent past, not just for centuries, but literally millennia.

BREAK THE ICE

"What is a hairstyle or fashion choice you had that now makes you cringe?"

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *The NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY 1 Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1994), 214.

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

EXPLORE IT

1. What issue does Paul bring up in v.2?
2. What is the presenting issue of the passage?
3. To what does Paul appeal as the base of his argument (vv. 7-9)?
4. What truth does Paul remind the Corinthians of (vv. 11-12)?

APPLY IT

It feels more than a little ironic that a passage that has caused no small amount of contention inside (and outside!) the church ends with Paul saying *“If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.”* It's almost as if Paul knows that this one is going to touch a nerve and battle lines are going to be drawn. It doesn't help that the language he uses here is ambiguous on several levels. Andrew Wilson offers a good summary of the difficulties in this passage:

The presenting issue in the first half of this chapter is head coverings, and what is appropriate for men and women in the context of Christian worship. It is a fiendishly difficult passage. Scholars continue to debate all kinds of issues that arise here, and five in particular are worth mentioning. One: We cannot be certain whether Paul is referring to wearing a covering over one's head, like a hood or a veil, or whether he is talking about the way people wear their hair. Two: We cannot be certain why he is concerned about it. Three: Much of Paul's argument is built on a wordplay around the word “head” (kephale), but there is disagreement on what the wordplay actually means. Four: The section contains a couple of theological curveballs that would be challenging in any passage, like “the head of Christ is God” (11:3), or “woman is the glory of man” (v 7), or “because of the angels” (v 10). Five: The relations between men and women are enormously controversial in our generation, and therefore any passage that addresses the subject so directly is bound to divide opinion. . . . And that is all without mentioning a sixth issue, which is probably most pressing for Christian readers: whatever Paul is saying, what on earth do we do about it?²

No small challenge for us then.

5. How do you tend to approach passages that are difficult to understand or may be controversial?

6. Which of the above issues stands out to you and why?

² Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, (The Good Book Company, 2023), 117–118.

So what do we do when we come to passages like this, ones that are difficult and which have led good and faithful people to very different conclusions? (To say nothing of the cultural difficulties they are bound to cause). Before we can tackle the specifics of a passage like this, we need to do a check on our posture and approach to the passage in question and to the Scriptures more generally. The following list, while not exhaustive, is a good starting place for us all:

- Begin prayerfully, asking God to show us himself and to reveal what he would have us to understand.
- Read the passage carefully, making sure we are paying attention to what is (and isn't) there. A helpful practice in difficult passages is to look at several translations side by side to see how they are the same and different. (www.biblegateway.com has a good parallel function which makes this easy without having to purchase any editions). Reading carefully also includes remembering what came before, and after a given passage (immediate context), recognizing the type of literature (genre), and looking into why the book was written and to whom. (A number of good study Bibles are available in the ESV, CSB, NIV and NLT that do a good job of helping in these areas. You don't have to buy lots of commentaries—but they can be helpful too.)
- Ask yourself if the passage is truly confusing or if you really don't like what you are reading and *want* it to be unclear.
- Identify the things that are clear in the passage as a starting point and work from there. It may be helpful to make a list of things that are clear and things that aren't. This can help us to see if the confusing parts change the core message of the passage or not.
- Remember that Scripture interprets Scripture. In other words, how does the rest of the Bible talk about the topic at hand? We go to the clearer Scriptures to help us understand the more difficult ones. Since we believe that Scripture is written by men but *from* God, we can expect differences in style or approach, but a consistent message overall even if the passage in question deals with a very specific issue (like head coverings in worship).

As mentioned, this list is not exhaustive, but it should help the process of studying difficult passages. In the case of our passage, try several of these points before answering the next questions.

7. What aspects of this passage do you find confusing (if any)? Did any of the points above help clarify things or at least to identify where the issues lie?

8. What did you identify as the things we can be sure of?

9. Do the things that are clear help you in deciphering the things that aren't?

In the case of 1 Cor. 11:2-16, some things are clear, but the things that are opaque can make it hard to understand what to do with the passage as a whole. Should we go back to wearing hats in church for women? Should we have a barber available after (or perhaps before) the service for men? What is the deal with angels? And what is all this about headship and authority?

The first issue that must be addressed is the most controversial in our time—headship. What does it mean that Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of the woman, and God is the head of Christ (v.3)? This needs to come before the issue of head coverings or hair not just because it comes first in the passage but because it is foundational to understanding what Paul is up to.

10. What is your gut level reaction to the idea of what you think “headship” means?

There are two basic schools of thought about the word headship. The first is that it means authority or sovereignty. In effect “ruler”. The second view is that it means source, as in the source of a river. Both positions have fairly strong grounds and the second has gained popularity in recent years, not least because the idea of headship as authority strikes us moderns as backwards and repressive. We don’t like the idea (or perhaps some *really* do, but for all the wrong reasons). But both of these perspectives have a problem, they isolate a single, modern meaning that might not square with the ancient world. Wilson explains:

To most of us, the “head” is simply the one in charge. The head of a school or a department, or the armed forces is the boss. . . . So when we see Paul saying that the “head” of the woman is man—or that the “head” of Christ is God—we read it through the lens of command and authority, whether or not that is what Paul meant.

Here, as it happens, that reading is partially right. The relationships between husbands and wives in Corinth, and between God and Jesus during his incarnation, did involve some measure of authority, as most scholars agree. But the heart of Paul’s picture is not command and control, like in a Western organization. It is honor and shame, like in an Eastern family. The “head” is not primarily the one in charge, or even the origin or source of everything else (although he is usually both); the “head” is the prominent, uppermost, supreme or pre-eminent one, the one whose reputation is either honored or shamed by the actions of others.³

When we see this passage through the lens of honor and shame several things come into clearer view. While cases can be made for either authority or source, both need to be placed within the context of the culture of first century Roman Corinth, not our own. The entire passage hangs on the idea of bringing honor, not shame to one another and ultimately to God. When we do inappropriate things, we do not simply shame ourselves but the one whom we represent. In the case of this passage, the issue is proper behavior and attire in a worship setting. Notice that verses 4 and 5 are in the same public worship setting and that both men and women are participating on some level.

11. How does understanding the background of honor and shame help you to understand this passage?

12. Given the issues that we have seen Paul deal with throughout 1 Corinthians, what do you think this says about our attitudes relating to self, others, and ultimately to Christ and the Father?

³ IBID, 119.

The second tricky issue is whether or not Paul is speaking of hair or head coverings in this passage. The Greek is ambiguous and strong arguments for both are possible. Many argue that married women in this time would not have gone into public without a hair covering, perhaps a veil or a shawl. Others argue that art from the time including statues and mosaics, show women unveiled but with their hair done up on top of the head, not hanging loose. In either case the woman is signifying her marital status and not to do so would be to indicate availability or promiscuity (an issue we have seen repeatedly in Corinth). Paul's reference to shaving a woman's head in vv.5-6 refers to a known punishment by husbands for adultery by their wives. So a woman wearing her hair down would likely imply sexual sin. Further, many of the mystery cults of gods like Dionysus and Cybele which were quite popular among women in this time period encouraged women to loosen their hair and try to enter an ecstatic state. Paul would certainly not have wanted any connection to these cults to be brought into Christian worship (as we have already seen in ch.10).

Culturally the case for women covering or putting up their hair is fairly straightforward even with the ambiguity of Paul's language. But what about men? Paul seems to speak of a covering in verse 4 and of long hair in verse 14. It is possible that both are in view. Among the Greeks and Romans of the time, long hair on a man was taken as a sign of effeminacy (virtually all statues of the period are of men with short hair except for war captives who are intended to look weak). Additionally, there is some evidence that when men participated in worship at the pagan temples, especially if they took on a ceremonial role, they covered their heads.

NT Wright offers a valuable insight into the implications of the head covering issue:

The underlying point then seems to be that in worship it is important for both men and women to be their truly created selves, to honour God by being what they are and not blurring lines by pretending to be something else. . . . the critical move he [Paul] makes is to argue that a man dishonours his head by covering it in worship and that a woman dishonours hers by *not* covering it. He argues this mainly from the basis that creation itself tends to give men shorter hair and women longer (verses 5-6, 13-15); the fact that some cultures, and some people, offer apparent exceptions would probably not have worried him. His main point is that in worship men should follow dress and hair codes which proclaim them to be male, and women the codes which proclaim them to be female.⁴

Paul makes it clear that he is not saying that women are inferior to men in verses 11-12 when he follows his argument from creation order with an argument for our interdependence—the first woman came from a man but every man since has come from a woman. We are not independent.

The strangeness of v. 10: “symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels” is difficult, but probably means a wife shows honor to her husband by making the choice to cover her head when participating publicly in worship with other men. Because she does so appropriately, she can't be disregarded in her participation. But what of the angels? William Baker explains:

Interpreters have offered numerous approaches to explain this reference, but for the most part they have settled on one, suggested long ago by Augustine: Paul must have thought of angels as being fellow participants in worship. In Qumran [the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls] angels were said to be “among the congregation” (1QSa 2:8-9; 1QM 7:4-6). In Revelation 7:11-12 thousands of angels gather around the throne and worship the slain lamb. In Hebrews 1:1-14 angels worship God Christ their Lord and are said to be servants “sent to care for people who will inherit Salvation.”⁵

Wright adds, that for the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran community

“This means that the angels, being holy, must not be offended by any appearance of unholiness among the congregation. Paul shares the assumption that the angels are worshipping along with the humans, but may be making a different point.

When humans are renewed in the Messiah and raised from the dead, they will be set in authority over the angels (6:3). In worship, the church anticipates how things are going to be in that new day. When a woman is praying or prophesying...she needs to be truly what she is, since it is to male and female alike, in their mutual interdependence as God's image-bearing creatures, that the world including the angels is to be subject.⁶

⁴ NT Wright, *1 Corinthians for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2023), 97.

⁵ William Baker, *1 Corinthians in Cornerstone Biblical Commentary Volume 15*, (Carol Stream, Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 163.

⁶ Wright, 97.

13. Given the fact that the specific situations regarding pagan worship and appropriate sexual behavior are no longer reflected (as much anyway) in our hairstyles, how do you think this passage should be applied today?
14. How does the idea of honor and dishonor in both our relationships as human beings, especially husband and wife in relation to those around us, and in our relationship to Christ change the way that you view this passage?
15. How does the idea that the angels both participate in our worship and are concerned that we worship appropriately impact your view of worship and our role in it?

16. How does Paul's emphasis on appropriate gender roles, not as an issue of superiority and inferiority, but of ultimately bringing honor to the God who created us, speak to today's culture which is so confused about issues of gender?