

Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible (1 Co 11:1–16)

C. Propriety in worship 11:2–16

This section and the next (11:17–34) deal with subjects different from meat offered to idols, but Paul did not introduce them with the phrase “now concerning.” These were additional subjects about which he wanted to give the Corinthians guidance. He had evidently learned of the Corinthians’ need for instruction in these matters either through their letter to him, from the messengers that brought that letter to Paul, or from other sources.

1. The argument from culture 11:2–6

Paul introduced the first of the two subjects he dealt with in this chapter, the Corinthian women’s participation in church worship, with praise. He did not introduce the second subject this way (vv. 17, 22). As with the other sections of this epistle, we can see the influence of Corinthian culture and world view in this one, particularly in the behavior of the women in the church.

11:2 Paul commended his original readers for remembering his teaching and example. This chapter deals with things that were going on in the meetings of the church primarily, as the context shows. The “traditions” (NASB) were “teachings” (NIV; Gr. *paradosis*) the Corinthians had received from the apostle. Some of these involved divinely inspired revelations and others just prudent advice (cf. 2 Thess. 3:6–10). They may have been following his instructions, but not in the proper ways, as his following discussion makes clear.

“*The traditions* (as the other references show) were the central truths of the Christian faith, handed on at this stage (before the emergence of Christian literature) orally from evangelist and teacher to convert.”²³⁴

11:3 “But” indicates that things were not quite as Paul thought they should be. He began dealing with his subject by reminding the Corinthians again (cf. 3:23; 8:6) of God’s administrative order. This is the order through which He has chosen to conduct His dealings with humans.

Jesus Christ is the head of every male human being (Gr. *aner*). Second, the male is the head of woman (Gr. *gune*). This Greek word for woman is very broad and covers women of any age, virgins, married women, or widows. Paul used it earlier in this epistle of a wife (7:3–4, 10–12, 14, 16). In this chapter it evidently refers to any woman who was in a dependent relationship to a man such as a wife to a husband or a daughter to a father. Paul probably did not mean every woman universally since he said the male is the head of woman, or a woman, but not *the* woman. He was evidently not talking about every relationship involving men and women, for example the relationship between men and women in the workplace. Third, God the Father is the head of God the Son. This shows that headship exists even within the Godhead.

The New Testament uses the term “head” (Gr. *kephale*) to describe headship in two ways. Sometimes it describes origin (source), and other times it describes authority (leader).

²³⁴ 234. Barrett, p. 247. Of course, there were already a few inspired New Testament documents circulating among the churches.

Some scholars favor one interpretation and others the other.²³⁵ Both meanings are true to reality, so it is difficult to decide what Paul meant here.

In favor of the origin view, it is true that Christ created mankind, Eve came from Adam, and Christ came from the Father in the Incarnation to provide redemption. In favor of the authority view, humanity is under Christ's authority, God created woman under man's authority, and the Son is under the Father's authority. The idea of origin is more fundamental than that of authority. Also "head" occurs later in this passage with the idea of source (vv. 8, 12), so origin may be the preferable idea here too.²³⁶

11:4 Here Paul used the word "head" twice. Clearly in the first instance he meant the man's physical skull. What did he mean the second time he referred to the man's head? He could have meant his physical skull again. However, in view of what he just said (v. 3) and would say, he probably meant his spiritual head, Jesus Christ. In Judaism when a man prayed with his physical head covered, as was common, he did not thereby dishonor himself. In Christian worship the men did not wear head coverings.

Paul's reference to praying and prophesying sets his instructions in the context of the church at public worship.²³⁷ Praying involves expressing one's thoughts and feelings to God. Prophesying might involve any of three things. Prophets foretold future events pertaining especially to the kingdom of God (Matt. 11:13; Acts 2:17–18; 21:9). They also declared new revelation from God (Matt. 26:68; Mark 14:65; Luke 22:64; cf. 7:39; John 4:19). Third, they could under divine impulse utter some lofty statement or message that would glorify God (Luke 1:67; Acts 9:6), or a word of instruction, refutation, reproof, admonition, or comfort for others (1 Cor. 13:9; 14:1, 3–5, 24, 31, 39). This last type of prophecy did not contain a new revelation or a prediction involving the future.²³⁸ The last

²³⁵ 235. For helpful studies, see Stephen Bedale, "The Meaning of *kephale* in the Pauline Epistles," *Journal of Theological Studies* NS5 (1954):211-15; Paul S. Fiddes, "'Woman's Head Is Man': A Doctrinal Reflection upon a Pauline Text," *Baptist Quarterly* 31:8 (October 1986):370-83; Wayne Grudem, "Does *kephale* ('Head') Mean 'Source' or 'Authority Over' in Greek Literature? A survey of 2,336 Examples," *Trinity Journal* 6NS (1985):38-59; idem, "The Meaning of *kephale*: A Response to Recent Studies," *Trinity Journal* 11NS (1990):3-72; idem, "The Meaning of *kephale* ('head'): An Evaluation of New Evidence, Real and Alleged," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:1 (March 2001):25-65.

²³⁶ 236. Barrett, p. 248.

²³⁷ 237. Harold R. Holmyard III, "Does 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 Refer to Women Praying and Prophesying in Church?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:616 (October-December 1997):461-72, argued that 11:2–16 does not address congregational settings. Other commentators who held this view include J. N. Darby, *Notes of Readings on the Epistles to the Corinthians*, pp. 85–87; Olshausen, p. 174; C. T. Ellicott, *St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 202; W. E. Vine, *1 Corinthians*, p. 147; J. A. Beet, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians*, p. 181; Lenski, p. 437; Grosheide, pp. 341–42; and J. MacArthur, Jr., *1 Corinthians*, p. 256.

²³⁸ 238. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. "*propheteuo*," p. 553. See also Wayne A. Grudem, "Prophecy—Yes, But Teaching—No: Paul's Consistent Advocacy of Women's Participation Without Governing Authority," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30:1 (March 1987):11-23; and idem, "Why Christians Can Still Prophecy," *Christianity Today*, September 16, 1988, pp. 29–31, 34–

activity is what seems to be in view in other references to prophesying in this epistle, and it suits the context here as well. Praying and prophesying were two major features of Christian worship services (cf. Acts 2:42).

11:5a The opposite condition existed when women prayed or prophesied in the church meetings. Every woman who had her physical skull *uncovered* thereby dishonored her metaphorical head, namely her husband or father (v. 3).

What did Paul mean when he described a woman's head as "uncovered?" There have been three major explanations. He may have meant that her head lacked some type of external cover, such as a shawl. Second, he could have meant that she had short hair that did not cover her head as completely as long hair. Third, he may have meant that she had let her hair down rather than leaving it piled up on her head. It was customary for women to wear their hair up when they went out in public. Probably he meant that she did not have an external covering on her head (view one).²³⁹ The woman would dishonor her man by participating in public worship as he did, namely with head uncovered.

Christian women typically wore a head covering in the church meetings. This was not a stylish hat, skull cap, or inconspicuous doily, as some western women do today, but a shawl that covered her entire head and concealed her hair.²⁴⁰

"Her face was hidden by an arrangement of two head veils, a head-band on the forehead with bands to the chin, and a hairnet [sic] with ribbons and knots, so that her features could not be recognized."²⁴¹

In Paul's culture most women, Christians and non-Christians alike, wore such a covering whenever they went out in public. Conservative Islamic women still veil themselves when they go out in public.

Probably the issue in the Corinthian church that Paul was addressing was that certain "wise," "spiritual," liberated women had stopped wearing this covering in the church meetings. Paul had previously written that in Christ males and females are equal before God (in many respects; Gal. 3:28). This teaching, combined with the Corinthians' carnal tendencies, were evidently the root of the problem.

11:5b–6 A woman who shaved her head in Greco-Roman culture did so to appear as a man. This resulted in the blurring of the relationship between men and women, particularly the sexual distinctions. Men typically wore their hair short, and women wore theirs long. If a woman cut her hair short, it indicated that she wanted to take the place of a man. Not covering her head made the same statement in that society.

It was a shameful thing for a woman not to cover her head in the early New Testament churches. Such an act made a statement that she was repudiating her position as a

35. Grudem sought a middle position between the charismatic and non-charismatic interpretations of the gift of prophecy. See his *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* and *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*. Robert L. Thomas, "Prophecy Rediscovered? A Review of *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:593 (January-March 1992):83-96, gave a helpful critique of Grudem's views.

²³⁹ 239. See Fee, *The First . . .*, pp. 495–97, 509–10.

²⁴⁰ 240. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, p. 104.

²⁴¹ 241. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 359.

woman. It was not so much a repudiation of her submission to her male authority as it was a repudiation of her origin as being a woman who had come from man (v. 3). The issue is origin throughout the passage, not primarily authority. Obviously a woman who repudiated her origin as a woman might also repudiate her authority to function under her male head. However in this passage Paul seems to have been dealing with the more fundamental issue of origin.

Today it is not shameful for a woman to have short hair, but it was in Paul's day. There are many short hair styles that no one regards as disgraceful. However in Paul's culture short hair for a woman represented rebellion against authority, and people considered it shameful. Paul used the common reaction to women's short hair in his day to urge his female readers to wear a head covering. His point was that since it was shameful for a woman to have short hair it was also shameful for her to have her head uncovered when she prayed or prophesied.

Must a Christian woman cover her head in church meetings today? I think not. Covering the head and wearing short hair do not normally mean the same thing in modern times, at least in the West, as they did in Paul's culture. If he were writing to a western church today, for example, I do not believe Paul would have said it is a shameful thing for a woman to have short hair. Therefore I do not think he would have said she ought to cover her head. Covering the head was a sign of acknowledgement of origin in Paul's day, which implied some acknowledgement of authority, but it is not today typically. Today there is no item of clothing that makes such a statement nor does the length of a woman's hair. A woman's whole personal demeanor, especially how she views herself as a woman, reveals this about her.²⁴²

"Although various Christian groups have fostered the practice of some sort of head covering for women in the assembled church, the difficulties with the practice are obvious. For Paul the issue was directly tied to a cultural shame that scarcely prevails in most cultures today. Furthermore, we simply do not know what the practice was that they were abusing. Thus literal 'obedience' to the text is often merely symbolic. Unfortunately, the symbol that tends to be reinforced is the subordination of women, which is hardly Paul's point. Furthermore, it would seem that in cultures where women's heads are seldom covered, the enforcement of such in the church turns Paul's point on its head."²⁴³

2. *The argument from creation 11:7–12*

Paul proceeded with a second supporting argument to correct the Corinthians' perversion regarding women's head coverings.

11:7 Men should not cover their heads in Christian worship because they are the glory of God. Whereas Paul referred to man being the image and glory of God, his primary point was that man is the glory of God. His reference to man as the image of God clearly goes back to Genesis 1:26–28, but there "glory" does not appear. "Glory" is Paul's word, his reflection on the creation of man. This is the word that he proceeded to use to contrast man and woman.

²⁴² 242. For a defense of the view that women should wear head coverings today in church meetings, see Bruce K. Waltke, "1 Corinthians 11:2–16: An Interpretation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135:537 (January-March 1978):46-57.

²⁴³ 243. Fee, *The First . . .*, p. 512.

Notice that Paul did not say that the woman is to cover her head because she is the glory of man. Instead he proceeded to describe what her being his glory means. A subordinate glorifies the one in authority over him or her just by being in a subordinate position.

“. . . he [Paul] says that woman is the glory of man—not his image, for she too shares the image of God, and is not (as some commentators have thought) more remote from God than is man.”²⁴⁴

11:8 Woman is the glory of man, first, because she came from him in creation. As Adam glorified God by being the product of His creation, so Eve glorified Adam because she came from him. The female sex did not produce the male sex, but the first woman came from the first man. God formed Eve out of a part of Adam whom He created first (Gen. 2:18, 20).

11:9 Furthermore woman is the glory of man because God created Eve to complete Adam. God did not create the man as a companion for the woman but the woman for man’s sake (Gen. 2:21–22). When Adam saw Eve for the first time, he “gloried” in her (Gen. 2:23). Neither of these verses (vv. 8–9) refer to the subordination of woman under man, though many interpreters have read this into the text. Rather they refer to her origin as being in man.

11:10 Paul drew a conclusion from what he had already said (vv. 7–9) and gave a supporting reason for his conclusion.

Unfortunately the NASB translators have added “a symbol of” to the original text thus implying that the head covering is what women ought to wear on their heads. The Greek text simply says “the woman ought to have authority on her head.” In the preceding verses the reason is that she is the man’s glory. In light of verse 7, we might have expected Paul to say that because the woman is the glory of the man she should cover her head. Yet that is not what Paul said.

What is this “authority” that women ought to have on their heads? Some interpreters believe it refers to the man in her life who is in authority over her. The covering is the sign that she recognizes him in this role.²⁴⁵ This view lacks support in the passive use of *exousia* (“authority”). Furthermore the idiom “to have authority over” never refers to an external authority different from the subject of the sentence elsewhere.

Other interpreters view “authority” as a metonym for “veil.”²⁴⁶ This view is unlikely because “authority” is a strange word to use if Paul really meant “veil.” It would have been more natural for him to say “veil” or “covering.”

A third view is to take “to have authority” as meaning “a sign of authority, namely as a means of exercising authority.” Advocates believe Paul meant that women were to have

²⁴⁴ 244. Barrett, p. 249.

²⁴⁵ 245. The Living Bible gives this interpretation by paraphrasing the verse, “So a woman should wear a covering on her head as a sign that she is under man’s authority.” See also F. Godet, *Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 2:122; Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, p. 211.

²⁴⁶ 246. A metonym is a figure of speech in which one word appears in place of another associated with or suggested by it (e.g., “the White House says” for “the President says”). The RSV translation gives this interpretation: “That is why a woman ought to have a veil on her head.”

authority to do things in worship previously forbidden, such as praying and prophesying along with men. Her covering would serve as a sign of her new liberty in Christ.²⁴⁷ There does not seem to be adequate basis of support for this view in the passage.

The fourth major view takes having “authority” in its usual meaning of having the freedom or right to choose. The meaning in this case would be that the woman has authority over her head (man) to do as she pleases.²⁴⁸ Obviously this seems to run contrary to what Paul taught in the passage and elsewhere. I think perhaps Paul meant that women have freedom to decide how they will pray and prophesy within the constraint that Paul had imposed, namely with heads covered. The head covering, then, symbolized both the woman’s subordinate position under the man and the authority that she had to pray and prophesy in public.²⁴⁹

The other major interpretive problem in this verse is “because of the angels.” Why did Paul introduce angels into this discussion? Perhaps the Corinthian women needed to wear a head covering because angels view what is taking place among God’s people (cf. 4:9; Eph. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:21). Angels are the guardians of God’s created order. For other people to see Christian women unveiled was bad enough because it was a sign of insubordination, but for angels to see it would be worse.²⁵⁰

There may also be something to the suggestion that these Corinthian women, and some of the men as well, may have been exalting themselves to the position of angels (cf. 7:1; 13:1).²⁵¹ Paul may have mentioned the angels to remind them that they were still under angelic scrutiny.

Other less acceptable interpretations of “because of the angels” are these. Women should cover their heads because evil angels lusted after women in the church (cf. Gen. 6:2). If this were the reason, should not all women wear veils at all times since angels apparently view humans in other than church meetings? They should do so because the word angels (lit. messengers) refers to pastors of the churches who might lust after them. They should wear head coverings because good angels learn to be submissive to authority from the women’s example. They need to cover themselves because good angels are an example of subordination and would take offense if they viewed insubordinate women. Finally they should wear head coverings because a woman’s insubordination would tempt good angels to be insubordinate.

Is observance by angels not a reason Christian women should cover their heads in church meetings today? Again I think not. In that culture a woman’s appearance in public unveiled was a declaration of her rejection of her God-given place in creation. The angels would have recognized it as such, and it would have offended them. However today a woman’s decision to appear unveiled does not usually make that statement. Consequently her unveiled condition does not offend the angels.

²⁴⁷ 247. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, p. 106. See also M. D. Hooker, “Authority on Her Head: An Examination of I Cor. XI. 10,” *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963–64):410-16.

²⁴⁸ 248. William M. Ramsay, *The Cities of St. Paul*, pp. 202–5; Morris, p. 154.

²⁴⁹ 249. See Barrett, p. 255.

²⁵⁰ 250. Robertson and Plummer, p. 233.

²⁵¹ 251. Fee, *The First . . .*, p. 522.

11:11 Even though the positions of man and woman differ in God's administrative order, this does not mean they can get along without each other. They are mutually dependent on each other. They complement one another. They are interdependent, even as the Son and the Father are. Paul's main point was that woman is not independent of man. This is further evidence that he was countering an illegitimate spirit of independence among some Corinthian women.

In a family, companionship should replace isolation and loneliness. There must be oneness in marriage for a husband and a wife to complete one another. Self-centered individuality destroys unity in marriage. If you are married, you need your husband or wife. Your spouse is necessary for you to be a well-rounded person.

11:12 Even though God created Eve from Adam, now every male comes from a female. This fact illustrates male female interdependence and balances Paul's emphasis in verse 11. Together verses 11 and 12 form a chiasm structurally. Husbands and wives have equal worth. Still God originates both of them, and both are subordinate to Him.

The apostle's emphasis in this section was on the authority that a woman has in her own right by virtue of creation. She must not leave her divinely appointed place in creation by seeking to function exactly as a man in church worship. Furthermore she should express her submission to this aspect of God's will in a culturally approved way. At the same time she must maintain a healthy appreciation for the opposite sex.

3. The argument from propriety 11:13–16

Paul now returned to the main argument (vv. 4–6), but now he appealed to the Corinthians' own judgment and sense of propriety. He raised two more rhetorical questions. The first (v. 13b) expects a negative answer and the second (vv. 14–15) a positive response. The apostle appealed to the nature of things. His points were that "nature" itself distinguishes between the sexes, and that a woman's naturally longer hair reinforces the propriety of covering her head in worship.

11:13 In Paul's culture it was not proper for a woman to act as a spokesman for people with God by praying publicly with her head uncovered. To do so would be tantamount to claiming the position of a man in God's order. The apostle did not think it wise for Christian women to exercise their liberty in a way that would go against socially accepted behavior even though they were personally submissive. Today what is socially accepted is different. Again her attitude is crucial.

11:14–15 Women's hair naturally grows longer than men's hair. Paul reasoned from this fact that God intended for women to have more head covering than men. People generally regard the reverse of what is natural as dishonorable. In the man's case this would be long hair and in the woman's case short hair. By "nature" Paul evidently meant how his culture felt about what was natural.²⁵² "Glory" means "honor."

This is a very general observation. The fact that some acceptable men's hair styles are longer than some women's does not mean these styles are perversions of the natural order. Men are usually taller than women, but this does not mean that a short man or a tall woman is dishonorable.

11:16 If any of his readers still did not feel inclined to accept Paul's reasoning, he informed them that the other churches followed what he had just explained. This is one of four similar statements in this epistle that served to inform the Corinthians that they were out of step with the other churches in their conduct (cf. 3:18; 8:2; 14:37). Some women were evidently discarding their head covering in public worship.

²⁵² 252. Barrett, p. 257.

As with the issues of eating in idol temples and meat offered to idols, Paul dealt with a cultural practice when he dealt with head coverings. As should be clear from his argumentation, he did not feel that this was a major issue. He argued for maintaining a custom, not for obeying God, and he used shame, propriety, and custom to urge the Corinthians to cooperate. However, important issues lay behind the practices. In the case of head coverings, the issue is women's position in the life of the church, in particular their relationship to the men. Today no item of clothing consistently identifies a woman's acceptance or rejection of her role in God's administrative order. At least none does in western culture. It is usually her speech and her behavior that do. The important thing is her attitude toward her womanhood and how she expresses it, not whether she wears a particular item of clothing.²⁵³ Rather than teaching women to be submissive to men this passage glorifies womanhood.¹

²⁵³ 253. See David K. Lowery, "The Head Covering and the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:2–34," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143:570 (April-June 1986):159, who concluded that head coverings are not necessary today. For another exposition of verses 2–16 by a former Dallas Seminary professor, see H. Wayne House, "Should a Woman Prophesy or Preach before Men?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:578 (April-June 1988):141-61. He concluded they should not. See also Kenneth T. Wilson, "Should Women Wear Headcoverings?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:592 (October-December 1991):442-62, who concluded that women need not wear a head covering today, as did Barclay, *The Letters* . . . , p. 110.

¹ Tom Constable. (2003; 2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (1 Co 11:1–16). Galaxie Software.