

A CONCERN

Let me share with you my biggest fear regarding this passage, beginning with an illustration from my deep dark past.

Many years ago, in another time and place, I was regularly visiting a therapist who was in the process of writing—and before we parted company, published—a book entitled, *The Mind of Your Newborn Baby*. In this book the psychologist made the case for the active mind not just of the newborn, but the unborn. Some of his journal articles are titled, “The Prenatal Psyche: Evidence for a New Perspective,” “Communicating with the Mind of a Prenate,” “Prenatal Body Language,” and “Babies Don’t Feel Pain: A Century of Denial in Medicine.” Throughout his book, which I read but then immediately passed along to someone else, this doctor (now deceased) made a strong case for the active mind and body of the unborn. But then, when one turned the page to the very last chapter, which deals with the subject of abortion, the author runs screaming back to his liberal/leftist roots, putting his stamp of approval on a procedure that *destroys* the life of that thinking, understanding child that—as he affirms—has memories and *does* feel pain!

My biggest fear is that after we have read, studied, and digested thoroughly the text before us in the first sixteen verses of Chapter Eleven, doing our best to discern faithfully the word of God—we will then run for safe, comfortable shelter within the societal norms of today. So in my own study and preparation, even as I juggle the differing positions of the scholars whose minds are superior to my own, I remain determined that our conclusion and application will be substantiated *not* by societal norms, but by the text itself.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-9.**PREFACE**

In our last session Paul, in v3, established the principle of “headship”—the fact that for every person—even Christ Jesus, but excepting God the Father—for every person there is a “head” (*kephale*), someone who occupies the position above or in front of the individual.

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.

Because even Christ has a “head” (God the Father) the position under a head does not connote inferiority. For example, look at how Paul balances the relationship between man and woman. In v3 he states that “the man is the head of a woman”; yet look at vv11-12.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:11-12.

To help us understand this, let me quote Gary Crandall from his paper on this passage, who begins by citing Stephen Bedale, who writes that authority is connected with headship “not because of a controlling influence of the head over the limbs, but because of the idea of *priority*. A chief authority in social relationships is largely dependent upon his ‘seniority,’ or ‘priority,’ in the order of being.”

Crandall: Thus, Christ is the head of every man because of His priority in time and position as the *active agent in creation* (“through whom are all things, and we exist through Him,” 1 Corinthians 8:6, Colossians 1:16). The man is the head of a woman because of his priority in time and position, “for man does not originate from woman, but woman from man,” (1 Corinthians 11:8). God is the head of Christ because of a priority in position ([but] not time, for Christ as God is eternal) in that as the Second Person of the Godhead He is subordinate to the Father in function.

Any intent to use this passage as proof-text for the superiority of man over a sublimated, inferior woman is misguided. Paul’s purpose here is not to assert the supremacy of man over woman, but to establish that *each* has a head, and to point out that each has an obligation to honor that head—principally in, but also beyond, corporate worship.

v4

Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.

The jury is out on the *reason* Paul is raising this issue. Our regular commentators in this study reach different conclusions as to Paul’s motivation. Gordon Fee understands the problem lying “with a breakdown in sexual distinctions,” which is not off-topic in the Corinthian letter. David Garland sees the threatening influence of idol worship—which continues from the context of Chapters Eight to Ten—as the primary reason for this topic. Both are feasible, and we will consider each in their turn.

As before we need to deal with a few definitions before we proceed. It is obvious right away that the word translated “head” (*kephale*) is being used more than one way in this verse and in v5. “Every man who has something on his head” refers to the person’s physical head, while “disgraces his head” refers not to the physical head, but the one who is over and above him—in the case of the man, that would be Christ Jesus.

The phrase “while praying and prophesying” leads us to conclude that Paul is speaking of a setting of public, corporate worship—specifically the word translated “prophesying” (*propheteuo*, prof-ate-yoo’-o). That word includes the idea of proclaiming openly, publicly, out loud.

This word is delineated *from* teaching in the first-century church, but in our time is blurred together *with* teaching, since we consider the prophetic gifts to be at an end.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:6.

Here is how to think of “prophesying” in the context of this letter: It is not foretelling the future; it is not speaking in tongues. It is instructional teaching, probably by a pastor, but differs from regular teaching in that the Holy Spirit has a stronger role.

Illustration: There are times, as I am searching for some old text in the archives of my publications, when I am amazed by something I wrote. My immediate response is, “Who wrote this? This is beyond my abilities.” Yet, clearly I *did* write it. For me that is evidence of the Spirit more actively working through me—to the extent that I was little more than the pen in His hand. By that I do not mean it is “Holy writ,” worthy of being included in the canon of Scripture; just that in that moment of composition the Spirit of God took firmer control. The Spirit assists me *every day*; I could not do my work without Him. But some times he takes greater control than at other times.

We must ask the question: Why would a man have something on his head in corporate worship? In our present time, few individuals of either sex have “something on their head” in church. When I was a little kid back in the fifties most men wore a hat (a fedora) *to* church, but took it off *in* church. In fact, the coat racks in the Baptist Temple had individual stations for the man to place his hat above his coat before entering the sanctuary. Women, on the other hand, wore a hat *to* church and *in* church. Frankly, that had more to do with fashion than doctrine. Women just wore hats in the fifties—and often gloves. Nonetheless, there would seem to be at least some connection with our text, for in that time and place, it would have been a shameful thing for a man to leave his hat on while in church, whereas it was perfectly respectable for a woman to be so attired.

Times change. This is not the fifties—nor is it the first century, when this letter was written. What was the situation in Roman Corinth at the time? Again we begin with the word, or, in this case, the phrase translated “something on his head,” or “with his head covered” (*kata kephales echon*). This phrase literally translated from the Greek is “having down from the head.”

Those who look at this from the “breakdown in sexual distinctions” perspective, interpret this to mean long hair on a man. That is, the man should *look* like a man with short, rather than long hair as a woman would wear. This, at first, seems a reasonable interpretation, but it breaks down as we travel deeper into this passage.

The better interpretation for “down from the head” is as some kind of material covering the head. We know from the first ten chapters of this letter that much of the surrounding culture was seeping into the church: in their divisions; their infatuation with eloquent, charismatic speakers; their winking at sexual immorality; suing each other in civil courts; and, in the most recent chapters, flaunting their “liberty” to the detriment of others in the church. And here again we may have a situation where practices of the pagan society in which the church dwelt have seeped into their worship.

Garland: Wearing the toga over the head at pagan sacrifices was a familiar practice. “The practice of men covering their heads in a context of prayer and prophecy was a common pattern of Roman piety and widespread during the late Republic and early Empire” (Oster). The toga pulled up over the head and hanging down from it fits the language “having down from the head.”

Sidebar: This is one of those passages where we wish we could cover everything all at once, for the various portions effectively inform each other. So, for example, v4 informs vv5-6 and v7, but those later verses also inform v4. Since it would be impossible (especially in thirty-minute increments) to deal with everything at once, it is incumbent on all of us—no less the teacher—to keep our wits about us, and be willing to read and reread, review, and trust—trust that something mentioned in one session will be validated in subsequent sessions.

Paul’s mention of this situation with some men in the church is probably hypothetical, and being used to contrast with the women. And regarding the aforementioned “trust,” we will see evidence in our next session that the overarching motif of this passage is *shame*. Back in the fifties it would have been a shameful thing for a man to leave his hat on during the worship service and in the first century Paul said that for a man to cover his head with a portion of his toga in corporate worship was a shameful thing, bringing dishonor, disgrace upon his “head,” Christ Jesus.

Why? Because of where the practice came from. It was in *pagan* worship that one covered the head, and nothing of that idolatry should be part of the church. How shameful it would be, how disgraceful for a man to worship the Lord God and His Christ using the same practices that are used to worship pagan idols.

There is another, more important reason that the man should not cover his head (v7: “For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God”) and, again, we will be discussing that in detail later.

But for now I’d like to leave you with something Henry William Soltau, the author of *The Tabernacle, the Priesthood, and the Offerings*, writes. Soltau was born in 1805 and died in his native England in 1875. Of the man it is said, “His teaching was remarkable, not only for its clearness and depth, but also for its close adherence to Scripture, thus proving how much he lived in communion with God.” Here is what he draws from this passage about the man being uncovered and the woman covered in corporate worship.

In the New Testament, the woman is directed to cover her head (1 Cor. 11:3-10) because “the head of the woman is the man;” whereas the man is to be uncovered, because he is the image and glory of God. In the assemblies therefore of the people of God, the woman, standing as a representative [or type] of the Church in subjection to Christ, covers her head; the man, being a type of Christ Himself as the Head of the Church, uncovers his head.

I take from this support for something that has been my soapbox for many years. That is, all things in the corporate worship of God should point to God, should glorify Him and Him alone. If, in the first century, a woman’s head was uncovered in the assembly of the church, attention would be drawn to her, and away from the Lord. This is why, for example, during actual worship I prefer to keep my eyes closed as much as possible, for I want my attention and thoughts to be upon the glorious throne of God, and not on what others are doing or wearing. It is also why Linda and I do not applaud any performance during the worship service; all praise in that moment should be *vertical*, not horizontal.

I believe we can draw many applications and imagery from this text. Henry Soltau offers us one. We will discover more as we progress through this challenging but fascinating passage.