

PREFACE

There is a powerful scene in the 1970 film, *Ryan's Daughter*, set in a small Irish coastal village during World War I. It has been found out that Rosy, the young wife of the straitlaced village schoolteacher, has been having an affair with the British Major from the local garrison—which means she is also accused of informing to the the British against her own people, Irish Catholics.

The people of the village come and drag the young woman from her house, overpowering and restraining her defending husband. The film does not show what the women of the village do, but afterwards Rosy's clothing is strewn about and all her long hair has been brutally cut off.

From ancient times through even recent history (and still in some cultures) the shaved head of a woman is a sign of disgrace and shame, identifying the woman as an adulterer or, at the least, brazenly immodest. Tacitus, a Roman historian writing in the first century, describes a husband of an adulterous wife who cuts off her hair, strips her, and banishes her from the house.

Here in our passage, the apostle Paul draws on this imagery to make his case about the propriety of a woman covering her physical head so as not to disgrace, or dishonor her spiritual head—i.e., the man, or husband.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:3-6.

Before we dig into vv5-6, let's first make sure we understand the setting. I pointed out in our previous session that the word translated "prophesying" (*propheteuo*, prof-ate-yoo'-o) makes it clear that Paul is not referring to someone alone in their prayer closet, but probably in corporate worship—i.e., in the company of others. It may be pertinent to our understanding of *why* Paul is bringing this up to remind ourselves that in first-century Corinth the church would not be meeting in a large building with a large number of people, but in someone's home with a small group of people. The first-century church would have more in common with our Sunday evening small groups, than a Sunday morning worship service. Why this may be a factor we will examine in a bit.

We must admit, however, that Paul does not *explicitly* reference corporate worship. Although I still think this is implied, as John MacArthur points out, no mention is made here "of the church at worship or in the time of formal teaching. Perhaps he has in view praying or prophesying in public places, rather than in the worship of the congregation."

Another component of the teaching in this passage we will briefly acknowledge here, but table discussion for a later time. There is an apparent conflict between v5 and 14:34-35. The first tells women who pray or speak in the assembly to have their heads covered, while the second tells women they are to remain silent in the churches. The astute reader would then ask, “Well, which is it?” We will look at this later.

v5

But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.

Most commentators suggest there is little point in trying to determine Paul’s reason for bringing this up. We simply do not know, and the text includes few clues. So we will focus on understanding what he *does* say. Exacerbating our task is that while local culture plays a critical role in this, in first-century Corinth we are dealing with several different cultures: Jewish, Roman, and Greek. Women from all three were in the church, yet, surprisingly, there was some commonality among them on this topic.

It was a disgraceful thing for a Hebrew woman to be out in public with her head uncovered, for the covered head was a sign of modesty. The Greco-Roman culture in Corinth agreed; it was taken for granted that respectable women wore a head covering in public. Here and in subsequent verses Paul amplifies this injunction by comparing a woman’s uncovered head “while praying or prophesying” to a woman with a shaved head. He is not suggesting there were women in the church with shaved heads; he is simply drawing this association to make his point—to say, *This is as bad as...*

An important point to keep in mind with all this is that while over the centuries the physical signals may have changed, the principles behind them have not. In all three cultures a woman with a *shaved* head would have been labeled—just as in the film *Ryan’s Daughter*—as an adulteress. It publicly shamed her as an immoral, deceitful woman who had brought shame and dishonor upon her husband and her family. Similarly, a woman out and about with uncovered (and especially loose) hair sent sexual signals. Just as the woman’s covered head conveyed the message that she was innocent, virtuous, (and thus) untouchable, a woman without a covering conveyed the message that she was *not* innocent or virtuous—perhaps even a prostitute.

A. Rousselle: Respectable women did nothing to draw attention to themselves... A veil or hood constituted a warning: it signified that the wearer was a respectable woman that no man dare approach without risking...penalties. A woman who went out...unveiled forfeited the protection of Roman law against possible attackers who were entitled to plead extenuating circumstances. Women who went uncovered in public gave nonverbal clues that they were “available.”

When Linda and I were dating in high school our pastor came into the youth group one evening to discuss teenage morals. As I recall, to show his “hipness” he combed his hair down and addressed us sitting cross-legged on the floor in the youth room. This would have been in the late sixties. I have never forgotten something he said; paraphrasing his remarks to people who were dating, “If you hold hands in public people will wonder what you must then be doing in private.” I questioned the value of that restriction at the time, and even more so today.

The signals have changed, but the principles have not. For both men and women, how we dress, what we look like, how we behave and speak in public—and no less in the assembly of the church—casts either honor or dishonor, exaltation or shame upon our respective heads: for the men, Christ; for the women, the man or husband.

I do not think it is possible to divorce this teaching from time and place. We must focus on the *principle* Paul is espousing, and not get hung up on the ever-changing signals. For example, during the Victorian era (late nineteenth century) a woman would never attend church services (or, frankly, any public venue) in any dress that revealed her ankle; modesty panels were employed on furniture to shield her ankles from prying eyes while she sat in the pews. And if the occasion and place—such as cycling or the beach—called for shorter or less voluminous attire, opaque stockings, preferably black, were required. One need not go into detail to acknowledge that times have changed—and not necessarily for the better. But what else does Paul say about the public appearance and behavior of women *and* men, and especially within the assembly?

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-4.

respectable^{nasb,nivs,esv}, **good behavior**^{kjvs}, **decent**^{ylt} = *kosmios* = from <G2889> (kosmos) (in its primary sense); **orderly**, i.e. decorous :- of good behavior, **modest**.

The same word is used in the letter for how women present themselves.

Read 1 Timothy 2:9-11. (**proper**^{nasb}, **modest (modestly)**^{kjvs,nivs}, **respectable**^{esv})

The root of *kosmios* is *kosmos*, from which we have the word “cosmos,” to refer to the well-ordered universe; also “cosmetics,” by the application of which some women (and actors) bring order to their countenance. As applied to our Corinthians text, and if we differentiate the principle from the signals, the apostle lays out the orderly and respectable presentation of a man before his “head” (Christ), and the orderly and respectable presentation of a woman before her “head” (man/husband).

Along with Creation itself, the Lord God created an order—an economy—for those who call upon His name. In function, the Father is before the Son, the Son is before man, and the man is before woman. None of this affects the individual's worth or rights; it was created to ensure that family life—both personal and in the congregation—is conducted properly, modestly, respectably. The woman is not to dishonor the man, the man is not to dishonor Christ, and certainly Christ *never* dishonors the Father. But this order does not move in just the one direction. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul states the case as he does to the Corinthians, but then he changes the direction.

Read Ephesians 5:22-30.

We are all of one body, and the love, the respect, the honor move in both directions. Christ loves and honors the Father, but he also loves the church. The woman does nothing to dishonor the man, but the man also does nothing to dishonor the woman. That is, mirroring Christ, just as he loves his “head,” he loves the one whose “head” he is. Is it the same for the one at the very top: the Father? Indeed it is. We see the love and honor flowing in both directions in something Jesus said in reply to the Jewish leaders in John’s gospel.

Read John 5:19-23.

That same reciprocity travels throughout the church—even down to the relationship of parents to their children. And it begins with the relationship between the ultimate “head,” God the Father, and the Son. Their mutual love supplies us with the template for our relationships with each other—not just between husband and wife, but between brothers and sisters in Christ.

There are deep theological points Paul is making here regarding the men and women of the church: headship, the hierarchy of the church, inter-personal relationships and marital relationships, propriety and modesty, honor and respect, appropriate behavior for both sexes in the assembly and in public. There is much to consider in this remarkable passage, and by God’s grace before we are through we will cover it all.