

PREFACE

Every generation has established limits. In these liberal days (say, in contrast to the more formal 1950s), we like to think we are freer to “be ourselves,” to dress as we like. Certainly how some dress for worship today would have been shocking in the 50s, but is accepted and considered acceptable today. But whether we like to admit it or not, even today there are limits. For example, would it be acceptable for a couple to attend worship in their respective swim suits—or would it be a distraction? Would it be accepted for the pastor of an evangelical protestant church to wear a monk’s robe, or the vestments of a Catholic priest? Closer to our text, would it be appropriate for a woman in the same evangelical church to attend wearing a *burqa*, covered from head and face down to her feet?

Could the wearing of any of these be termed a contribution to “orderly” worship?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:7-10.

Without breaking them out individually in our previous session, we effectively covered vv8-9 in our text by beginning our study in Genesis and the Creation account regarding the man and woman (Genesis 1-2). So we are ready for v10.

v10

Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

NIV2011: It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.

We now come to a verse so vague in its writing that no one in Christendom can claim to have an authoritative interpretation. Commentators invariably list all the possibilities cited by others, but then conclude by shrugging their shoulders in hopeless defeat. Thus I will do the same: I will present what I believe to be one of the more feasible explanations, but then conclude with a resigned, “We really don’t know for sure what Paul meant.”

A possible reason for this confusion is that the apostle probably knew that the members of the Corinthian church could easily fill in for themselves the pieces missing for us in this opaque sentence—sort of like how a husband and wife can eventually communicate in shorthand with each other because the mate can easily fill in the blanks on his or her own. From some of his teaching to them (of which we have no record), or from some of their local traditions or vernacular, they could easily understand his counsel with fewer words. Lacking what they had, we require more than what is here.

Several of our common translations have staked out their position by not just their choice of words, but their insertion of words modifying the original text. Key words in the text which impact our interpretation are

- **exousia**, translated authority, right, or power, which is often modified, as in the NASB, NKJV, and ESV, with the insertion by the editors of “a symbol of,” or “a sign of” in the original NIV (even YLT inserts the decidedly *un*-literal “a token of”); and
- **epi**, translated “on,” “upon,” or “over.”

Of these two, *exousia* is the more critical, the interpretation of which will affect our interpretation of *epi*. The original text has no modifier.

exousia = from <G1832> (*exesti*) (in the sense of ability); privilege, i.e. (subject) force, capacity, **competency**, freedom, or (object) **mastery** (concrete magistrate, superhuman, potentate, token of control), delegated influence :- **authority, jurisdiction, liberty, power, right, strength.**

I am fascinated by how the cross-reference resources treat this verse: NASB, nothing. ESV, nothing. Most fascinating, however, is the *Treasury*, which for this word includes only three OT references, the last of which is revealing.

Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel. She said to the servant, “Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?” And the servant said, “He is my master.” Then she took her veil and covered herself. (Genesis 24:64-65)

The Greek of our verse, however, only says *exousia* = power, authority. If one inserts the modifier, the picture is inescapably of the woman wearing something “on” (*epi*) her head that acknowledges or represents her submission to the man—i.e., her husband. Gordon Fee includes the following in a footnote:

Fee: The original NIV, with no textual or linguistic evidence of any kind, had rendered this “sign of authority on,” a false understanding perpetuated also by the ESV (“a symbol of authority”), as if that could possibly be wrested out of Paul’s Greek. The difficulty that some have with the plain meaning of the Greek goes way back, as evidenced in some early versions and Fathers, who variously substituted the word “veil” for *exousia*—with neither textual nor linguistic warrant.

Both Fee and Garland translate this “the woman ought to have authority over her head,” and the newer NIV2011 is the only translation that concurs (adding its own modifier to “head.”

It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.

Let's look at an earlier passage in which Paul used the word *exousia* to make his point, this time about food sacrificed to idols.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:4-13.

It is v9 that includes *exousia*, translated “liberty” or “right.” Paul is saying here, *Yes, in yourself you have the right to eat whatever you want, but for the sake of your weaker brother, it is better to abstain from this right. In fact, knowing this, when you do not abstain you are sinning against Christ.* [[back to Chapter Eleven](#)]

This then helps us understand v10—at least under this interpretation. Similar to what he says in Chapter Eight, we read v10 to say to the woman, *Yes, you have the right—the authority—to dress any way you like. But, for the sake of orderly, God-honoring worship—and for the sake of the angels—you should cover your (anatomical) head so as not to corrupt the worship of God with the glory of your spiritual head (the man).*

...because of the angels.

Now of course we have one more hurdle to cross before we leave this verse: What in the world is this about angels? Again, I will not take up our time with a listing of all the somewhat fanciful theories on what Paul is referring to by bringing up the angels. I will just share the interpretation that seems to track the best.

Paul, as well as other writers in the canon have intimated that the righteous angels of heaven (as opposed to the fallen angels that worship and serve Satan) are involved in, or at least observers of, the affairs of human beings. On the important matter of the selection of elders in the church, Paul counseled Timothy.

Read 1 Timothy 5:21.

And in our letter he included the angels in those to whom the apostles have become a spectacle.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:9.

So it follows that certain angels would be present in our worship, and because they are, literally, “messengers” of God, it is important that our assemblies be conducted in an orderly, proper and righteous manner.

Paul has a little more to add on this topic, in vv11-16, but he has stated his thesis, and now may be a good point in which to summarize this teaching and apply it to today.

In our entire Chapter Eleven the apostle's overarching topic is orderly worship. As subtopics to this, he addresses, first, how men and women are, or are not, to be attired—with a focus on their anatomical head (vv2-16). Second, he addresses the behavior of some in the assembly during “the Lord's Supper.” Praying, prophesying (vv4-5), and the ordinance of Communion (v20) are all elements of corporate worship.

Paul begins with the order of hierarchy in the church, the order of progressive headship that flows upward from woman to man, from man to Christ, from Christ to Father God. For orderly, God-honoring worship the recognition of this hierarchy is essential, for it hearkens back to the very moment when God created the first man and woman, and the fact that man was made first, and the woman was made *from* man to be his companion, helper—more than that, however, she *completed* man, supplying what was missing in him, together comprising a complete “one.”

As the handout in our previous session (#107) illustrated, in corporate worship man represents (signifies, reflects, illustrates, etc.) the glory of God, while woman represents the glory of man. What is right and proper for orderly worship is that both man and woman do nothing to disrupt (or distract from) the one “head” which is to be the true object of worship: God (the Father and Son, Christ Jesus). So man *should not* “cover” the glory he represents (God's), and the woman *should* “cover” the glory she represents (man's).

I believe vv4-6 in our passage are key to understanding how to be obedient to Paul's injunction *today*.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:4-6.

I would contend that the principles behind Paul's teaching have not changed, but the signals have. The principle is this: For both men and women, how we dress, what we look like, how we behave and speak in public—and especially in the corporate worship 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. Each person in attendance either contributes to authentic, orderly worship, or distracts from it as an obstacle or stumbling block. Let's examine, first, the setting in first-century Corinth.

- Verse 4, regarding the man, states that the man is not to have his anatomical head covered; to do so disgraces his head (Christ). This means that the man should not be wearing a cap, or turban, or have his outer cloak pulled over his head.
- Verse 5 states that a woman in worship (specifically, “while praying or prophesying”) who has her head uncovered is the same as “the woman whose head is shaved.” That is, in the first century a woman revealing her hair in the assembly was the same as a woman caught in adultery, or some other licentious act.
- Verse 6 reinforces this with the counsel that if she refuses to cover her hair, then she may as well have it all cut off—“but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off, or her head shaved, let her cover her head.” In that time it was disgraceful to appear in public so shorn; it would bring disgrace upon her husband, her family, upon her.

I do not believe it is possible to transfer this teaching *verbatim* to our time, because while the principle remains, the signals signify different things now—or nothing at all. If you are walking down the street and see a woman completely bald or with just scraps of hair on her head, what is your first thought? Probably that she is undergoing treatment for cancer. Likewise, if you see a woman in corporate worship with her full head of hair revealed, what is your first thought? Probably nothing at all, since the hair of every other woman in the assembly would be so revealed.

Some signals remain, however. If you see a man sitting in the church sanctuary wearing a Stetson, what is your first thought? Probably, *Shame on you. Take your hat off in church!* Your response might be based on simple custom and tradition, but in the back of your mind you might also be thinking that the man is being disrespectful to his God.

David Garland points out that this passage contains only one direct command, that in v6: “...let her cover her head.” It is not out of order for the translators to put this in the context of the anatomical head, for that it clearly is. The Greek text, however, does not include the word “head,” but is just “let her cover herself.”

With time and locale the signals change, but the principle remains. Paul here defends the principle that since we serve and worship a holy and righteous God, our worship of Him is to be holy, orderly, modest, conducted with propriety, and as much as possible free of anything that might turn our attention away from its object: the Lord God. This applies to both sexes, but, of course, in different ways. Invariably it falls more often than not on the woman, because from time immemorial, the woman shows and the man looks.

In the Greco-Roman and Hebrew culture of first-century Corinth, and Middle East in general, a woman in public with her long hair down and unfettered was a scandal, and she would be labeled a prostitute—or at least immoral, licentious. That is not the case today. In Paul’s time there was a sexual component to long, flowing hair; thus it was reserved for the husband, or at least within the walls of a private home.

Today it is not remotely a sign of shame for a woman to have her head uncovered in worship—it does not shame her husband, it does not steal glory from Christ (as it might have in the first century), nor does it represent a barrier to respectful worship. However, a woman who came into an evangelical assembly wearing a garment that draped over and down from her head would be an immediate oddity and distraction. Fair or not, attention would be drawn to her.

The woman, like the man, has the “right” (*exousia*) to dress any way she likes, but in the orderly economy of the church, giving due deference to her Lord and her husband (as her husband gives due deference to his Lord) takes precedence over her personal tastes. Both man and woman are to present themselves for worship with not just their Lord, but the integrity of Christ’s body in mind. Remember the illustration of the handout: Even if the man is personally pleased when his wife presents herself in such a way that she turns every male head, her behavior brings shame upon him before the Lord. Every person gazing upon her is *not* worshiping the glory of the Lord.

For us as individuals to be obedient to the principle set forth by the apostle Paul in vv2-16, every one of us—man or woman—is to ask him- or herself the same question when dressing for corporate worship: *Does my appearance say, “Hey, look at me!”*

That question is timely and pertinent no matter the century, no matter the locale. Are we presenting ourselves as *hindrances* to worship, or are we, as we bring honor to our respective heads, *facilitating* worship of the Lord God and His Christ?