

## God Glorifying Participation 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

When you heard that passage read did you, just for a moment, think “That’s the kind of passage that gives the Bible a bad name.”

It starts with an offensive statement that ‘man is the head of the woman’ which has been used by some to justify oppression

It goes on to insist on some kind of head covering for women at a time when brave young women in Iran are burning theirs in a quest for freedom, and talks of the shame of a shaven head when one of our very much loved members has just shaved off her hair in anticipation of her cancer treatment

It has at its heart verse 10 which seems unintelligible – ‘because of the angels’

And after all that in v. 13 we are told to decide the matter for ourselves.

The temptation for us is to dismiss this passage as too awkward, too sexist, too obscure, and too ancient

Did you feel that?

But if you acted on that feeling it would be a great shame and a great loss, for at the heart of this passage, what is driving the discussion of head coverings, is an understanding of humanity, of men and women and their relationship within a common humanity, and an understanding of the purpose of human life, which is both rich and beautiful, and when absorbed into our own thinking profoundly helpful.

Now, because there is much in these verses that is foreign to us, and because this passage like every other passage which talks of the relationship between men and women has been the subject of extensive debate, I am going to first work through the passage so that we understand what it says, and only when I have done that will we think about how it applies to us.

So – bibles’ open so that you can work through the passage with me, and there is a question time.

Start at v. 2

*1 Corinthians 11:2* Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold fast to the traditions just as I delivered them to you.

Paul is introducing a section in which he regulates the behaviour of the congregational gathering that runs through to the end of chapter 14, and he starts with praise

The Corinthians had got some things right, and one of the things they had got right was the participation of women and men in the gathering, having women and men together praying and prophesying in their gathering.

What Paul is plainly doing, for all the bits we find obscure, is regulating activity, not forbidding it. He wants it to go on, but to go on in a way that doesn’t undermine other important aspects of their life together and their witness to their community, in a way that is consistent with the rest of Christian revelation.

It is the manner, not the fact, of women and men praying and prophesying, that he addresses.

What is the praying and prophesying that is going on, in as far as we can tell – not having a tape recorder or video of their meetings? That question is asked because it feeds into discussions of what women and men can do today in the congregational gathering.

Prayer we think we know – it is talking to God, but this is public prayer, making prayers in the gathering to which all can say amen cf. 14:13-18.

Prophecy is a little more disputed as the record of and our experience of the range of prophecy is very limited.

Some say it is all intelligible words from God, all words that come from God through the work of the Spirit in someone's life that build others up [14:3], and so that could include general words of exhortation and encouragement.

[the full range of verbal activity we see in Acts as a consequence of the pouring out of the Spirit on Christ's people – Acts 2:17-18]

But in Corinth the sense of prophecy seems, as we see in chapter 14, more specific. It is intelligible words from God that come by revelation [1 Cor. 14:26, 30] which must then be tested, weighed, by those who hear. It would seem to be more like the prophecy of Agabus in Acts 11:27-28 who foretold by the Spirit the coming of a famine, and who in Acts 21:10-11 spoke of Paul's arrest and imprisonment.

What was the problem with the way they were doing it?

We see that in vv. 4-6

<sup>4</sup> Every man who prays or prophesies with something on his head dishonours his head. <sup>5</sup> Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, since that is one and the same as having her head shaved. <sup>6</sup> For if a woman doesn't cover her head, she should have her hair cut off. But if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her head be covered.

The problem seems to be that some men were covering their heads when they prayed or prophesied, and some women were not covering their head when they prayed or prophesied.

What is going on? Why is that an issue?

Let's think first about the attitude to and use of head coverings in first century Corinth. First century Corinth was a Roman colony, and so it is Roman customs that form the background.

We know from statues and friezes that upper class Roman men would cover their heads when making sacrifices and offerings to the gods. So blokes covering their heads was associated with idolatry and also high class status, a way of differentiating themselves from other worshippers and drawing attention to their own importance.

Paul characterises this behaviour as dishonouring or shaming their head, Christ

What about head coverings and women?

In Roman society girls were married generally in their mid-teens, 14-16, and at marriage they took on the veil of a bride, 'a social indicator by which the marital status of a woman was made clear to everyone' Winter p. 127. The traditional costume of a Roman matron writes Judith Lyn Sebesta "Signified her modest and chastity .... It consisted of her distinctive dress, the woolen stola, which was worn over a tunic; the protective bands which dressed her hair; and the woollen palla or mantle, which was used to veil her head when she went out in public." Cited in Rosner p. 516

This 'veil' or mantle was an extension of a garment draped over the head, like a shawl lifted over the head. It wasn't like a burkha, the face was always seen. In that society a respectable woman 'did nothing to attract attention to themselves ..... A veil or hood constituted a warning: it signified that the wearer was a respectable woman."

To wear a head covering in public was to say that you had respect for yourself, for others, and for social perception.

To remove the veil in public if you were a married woman, and most were married or widowed, was a rejection of the relationship to and authority of your husband, was seen as advertising sexual availability or at least autonomy in forming sexual liaisons, and a cause of shame to the husband. And it was something, reflected in some statues, that some powerful women in Rome, trend setters, were beginning to do [Winter].

As Rosner writes, abandoning head coverings was "a move towards a more licentious, a more sexually provocative, way of appearing in public", and Winter relates it to a determination of wealthy Roman elite women to live lives independent of their husbands.

This was a society where what you wore, or didn't wear, talked – clothing can talk powerfully in some societies, as we see in Iran.

And the message being given, says Paul, was one which shamed their heads, their husbands.

And as well as the negative cultural perception of what the Corinthians, men and women, were doing with their headwear or lack of it, their behaviour was also obscuring the difference, the distinction, between men and women in the gathering, ignoring what had been established at creation.

So what is Paul's response?

How does he seek to persuade them to change the manner of their praying and prophesying?

It starts at verse 3.

*<sup>3</sup> But I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of the woman, and God is the head of Christ.*

The CSB has changed the word order, and that loses a little of the emphasis, which is on everyone except God having a head.

In Greek it reads

Of every man the head is Christ, the head of the woman is the man [or of the wife is the husband Eph. 5:23], and the head of Christ is God.

There is a lot to think about in this verse which speaks of three relationships in which one member of the relationship is the head of the other

Men, women, Christ – each has a head – that is the emphasis. Everyone except God has a head, and for Paul it is important to understand this for your actions reflect on your head

There has been a lot of discussion about the sense of the word 'head' in its metaphorical use in these relationships.

Some have suggested it has the sense 'source', as in the head of the river. This was popularised, even in Dict of Paul and his letters, but this has been exhaustively refuted [Grudem JETS 44/1 [March 2001] 25-65], Thiselton

Its origin seems to be in the natural metaphorical extension of head as head of body [1 Cor. 12:21], against OT background, where the head is the representative of the whole

So it has a sense of Pre-eminence, top of something, but also has a sense of authority over

As Rosner writes 'in this context the word almost certainly refers to one with authority over the other' [p. 509], although the authority aspect is not emphasized. Rather the emphasis is on the fact that everyone has a head and the effects of the behaviour of the one who has a head on the honour, the glory, of their head.

What it means for someone to be the head of someone else has to be learned from elsewhere.

But a couple of general observations

[Other uses in Paul – Eph. 1:22 4:15 – nourishment but also authority, 5:23 – assoc with hypotassomai; Col. 1:18, 2:10, 19]

Paul presents three relationships which are different in many ways – the relationship between Christ and God, for example, is very different from the relationship between a wife and her husband, not least because both members of that last relationship are sinners.

The relationships Differ in the character of the head, and in the way the head relates to those whose head it is.

But in what way are they analogous, in what aspect are they alike so that they can be presented in this symmetrical way?

Each is a relationship between those who have the same nature, and yet it is a relationship characterised by an irreversible order

What do I mean. Let's look at each.

Take first man to Christ.

This doesn't mean Christ is not the head of women as well, for in other contexts – e.g. as the head of the church, or Eph. 4:15-16 – it is plain that He is. That tells you that in this context Paul is seeking to emphasise a particular aspect of the relationship.

Christ is a particular, incarnate, man. His is not just a generic humanity, but He is a man. He shares with all men male humanity. He is not just truly and fully human, He is human in being truly and fully man. So he shares a common male humanity, but there is clearly an order in His relationship with men, for He is also Lord. He is the preeminent man, and He rules over every man – the head of every man. This is a relationship between those with a common nature but which is an ordered relationship.

What of a woman to a man, a wife to her husband. I say wife to a husband because, although the Creation story embraces all men and all women, that is the context in which the statement is applied here, and in Ephesians 5:22-24, the other place where it speaks of the man as head of the woman it is clearly speaking of the relationship of a wife to her own husband.

They also share a common nature. Both are made in the image of God. The woman in Genesis 2, to which Paul will soon refer, is flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. All he is, she is. But there is also order in this relationship, the head of the woman is the man, and Paul will present his understanding of Genesis 2 that supports that in vv7-9.

What of Christ to God. Again, Christ shares the nature of God. He is the eternal Son, the word who was in the beginning with God, who is God, who became flesh [John 1:1-14]. Paul has spoken of Christ as being on the God side of the Creator – Creature distinction already in 1 Corinthians 8.

*1 Corinthians 8:6 yet for us there is one God, the Father. All things are from him, and we exist for him. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ. All things are through him, and we exist through him.*

And in Philippians 2:6 could say of Christ.

*Philippians 2:6 who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited.*

Christ is by nature God.

But Christ could say of the Father - the Father is greater than I [John 14:28], that He is sent by the Father e.g. John 6:38, that He loves the Father and does His will John 14:30

The relationship between Christ and God His Father is one of equality of nature, and order in the relationship of those who are equal in nature.

So we have here three Relationships of shared nature and order – order in the context of equality of being.

Differentiation and order can exist within a context of equality of being, of intrinsic worth. You do not have to be the same in all respects, or to have only roles and positions in a relationship that are interchangeable, to be equal in dignity and worth of being.

Some observations

There is nothing inherently oppressive in having a head.

Men are not enslaved by having Christ as their head, but liberated to live as God's children, to know freedom as they do His will [John 8:31-32, Gal. 5:1]

Christ comes to glory through loving the God the Father and doing His will. It is by submitting to the Father He is confessed by all as Lord

What makes the relationship to the head either life enriching or life oppressing is the behaviour of the head

Christ lays down His life for His people, took the initiative in loving us and giving us life.

The Father loves the Son and gives Him all things, shows Him all things, wills that all should honour the Son, gives Him all that is His and glorifies the Son [John 3:35, 5:20-23, 16:15, 17:1-5]

And we know from Ephesians that the husband being head means him loving His wife as Christ loved the church, laying down his life for his bride, cherishing her, loving her as he loves himself [Eph. 5:25-33]

Order in relationships can and sadly is abused by sin, but there is nothing inherently oppressive in having a head

Second observation - order is an inherently good thing.

It is because of order that words can convey meaning, are not just an unintelligible jumble.

Order in the processes of cells is the foundation of life.

Order in society allows societies and the individuals in them to live securely, and to be differentiated in the work they do and the lives they live.

Order is the context, not the enemy, of human flourishing – which is something some in our society, embracing the myth of natural goodness corrupted by a repressive society, denies [cf. Trueman]. But there is a world of difference between growing up in a well ordered family, to growing up in one that is chaotic

The corruption of order cannot be met by the abolition of order, for that is to destroy life, destroy the context of our flourishing. It has to be met with the renewal of order

Third observation – the order described here is irreversible. Men cannot be the head of Christ; Christ cannot be the head of God. To attempt either of those reversals of order would be a rebellion that would destroy life and the very fabric of our faith. And that implies that for Paul, and Paul is here speaking God's word, the order between women and men, the order he sees as established in their creating and expressed then as now in marriage, is also irreversible

Order: Not oppressive in itself

Good

Irreversible

Something to be welcomed

In fact when you think about the image you realise that to be headless is rarely an enviable state, and we should want our heads to be honoured

So Paul starts by asking the Corinthians to recognise that life and salvation give rise to relationships between those who share a common nature but in which there is an order in the relationship, an order to be exercised in love, where one is the head over the other, and this goes back to the very being of God

He then applies this to the Corinthian behaviour to help them recognise the problem in what they are doing

Recognise the problem

<sup>4</sup>Every man who prays or prophesies with something on his head dishonours his head. <sup>5</sup>Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, since that is one and the same as having her head shaved.

<sup>6</sup>*For if a woman doesn't cover her head, she should have her hair cut off. But if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her head be covered.*

He starts with the men v. 4

By praying or prophesying with head covered they are dishonouring their head.

They are using their activity not to proclaim Christ's greatness, but to signal their own importance and high status

And they are likening the Lord Jesus Christ their head, whom they are called to serve, to an idol.

That is to sow confusion, for the sake of their own proclamation of their high status, and to dishonour Him.

And then he turns to the behaviour of the women.

By participating in a public role with their physical heads uncovered they are dishonouring their metaphorical, their relational head, their husband.

They are shaming him by publicly not acknowledging their relationship to him – putting aside the social indicator that they were married, and at the same time advertising their sexual freedom. And in shaming their head, they were by their determination to express their independence and drawing attention to themselves, also shaming their husband's head – Christ.

Paul uses a graphic image to bring home the reality of what they are doing, to help them recognise its inappropriateness and offence.

Not having a head covering *is one and the same as having her head shaved.*

Paul is not talking about getting ready for chemotherapy. In that society 'for a woman to appear in public with a shaved head was to suffer extreme public humiliation' [Rosner p. 521], and there is evidence that it was associated with being marked as sexually immoral or a prostitute

<sup>6</sup>*For if a woman doesn't cover her head, she should have her hair cut off. But if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her head be covered.*

Paul's argument is summarised by Bruce Winter "If she did this [removed the veil – palla or mantle] while participating in a leading way in an open meeting, then she publicly dishonoured her husband [11:5] and ought to bear the public stigma. Paul then argued the converse, that if it was shameful for a wife to be shorn or shaven, then the only alternative was to wear the marriage veil [11:6c]." p. 129 After Paul left Corinth.

This was an honour shame culture, and Paul's argument is powerful.

And he supports his insistence on the recognition and maintenance of the difference between men and women and an order in that difference, a difference and order to be expressed in their participation in the congregational gathering, by turning to creation. While the expression of order and difference may be socially conditioned, the existence of difference and order is grounded in creation, and so applies to all people, is a transcultural reality.

<sup>7</sup>*A man should not cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God. So too, woman is the glory of man. <sup>8</sup>For man did not come from woman, but woman came from man. <sup>9</sup>Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man.*

Paul speaks of the glory of God and the glory of man

Glory – what expresses the weight, the impressiveness of someone or something; what 'reveals, reflects manifests the own whose glory it is and leads others to be caught up in admiration of that one' [Rosner]

It is God who should be admired in a Christian gathering, God as He has revealed Himself in Christ, His glory pursued as in all the Christian life [10:31]

Paul is arguing for an arrangement that will lead to an exclusive focus on God's glory – not the man's or the woman's who is participating. - by maintaining gender distinctions and respect for what God has willed and established at creation and in the creation order.

He says man – image and glory of God

That is drawing on the Creation of humanity in God's image in Gen. 1, but Paul is particularly reflecting on Genesis 2, where man is created first of the dust and then entrusted with stewardship of the garden, to till and keep it. Those actions show God as the ruler and owner of creation and manifests His might, giving life to dead dust – man in Genesis 2 reveals the glory of God.

And in that account woman is the glory of man

Paul again takes Genesis 1 for granted. He is not denying woman is the image of God, but he is focusing on the differentiation in their creating described in Genesis 2

So man is the image and glory of God, woman is the image of God and the glory of man.

He is referring to the creation of woman in Gen. 2 – as verses 8-9 make clear, the bit with the animals and then the creation of woman from the rib of Adam. That creation of woman distinguishes the man from all the non-human creation, reveals in her creating, in her coming from Adam, Adam's uniqueness in all that has been created. And that creating was deliberate, to meet his need. She displays his specialness, significance, his glory, to the creation – only this one is a helper fit for him.

There is nothing demeaning in this – in fact it is in being flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone that she is also image of God.

And Paul's point to those women who were seeking to participate without their veils is that there is an order in this creating which is irreversible, both established and revealed by God.

Those things in the account, he teaches, are significant for the ordering of the relationship between men and women, husbands and wives

It is why the husband should be reckoned as head, and why she should continue to put on her head covering when she leads in prayer or prophecy in the gathering – so the focus is not on her, or on her husband – but on God the Creator. In honouring her husband by respecting the relationship with him she is also honouring His head Christ [for his dishonour reflects on his head], which in turn honours, gives glory to God.

<sup>10</sup> *This is why a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.*

Difficult to translate, but it is an appeal to the women to do something.

An appeal, in context, for her to put on her veil or mantle when she leads in prayer or prophecy.

But here it is described as 'a symbol of authority' – and there is an intriguing further reason – 'because of the angels.'

[Rosner "We are reminded that those with authority were often recognized by the symbols of authority that were placed on their heads (crowns, diadems etc.). .... The Roman world was full of statues and other images of men and women who had 'authority on their heads' in the form of signs of royal power." P. 532]

A symbol of her Authority to do what?

Her authority or right to participate in prayer and prophecy as she seeks God's glory by respecting the creation order and her relationship with her husband, and respects her own dignity, that is as she seeks not her own good but the good of many, as Paul has called all believers to at the end of chapter 10. [like Christ denying herself, her autonomous rule]

*1 Corinthians 10: <sup>31</sup> So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. <sup>32</sup> Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, <sup>33</sup> just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved. **11** Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ.*

And she should do this

‘because of the angels’ – considered as witnesses to creation, those entrusted with being guardians of the created order.

It is a reminder we are not the only one created by the Creator, and what we do on earth, in our gatherings, are witnessed by others – just as Paul can say in Ephesians 3:10 that ..

*Ephesians 3: <sup>10</sup> This is so that God’s multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens.*

God’s creation order extends beyond us, and its honouring or otherwise is of interest to all God’s creatures.

[‘Winter an intriguing suggestion that they are messengers of the other churches, or messengers sent by people thinking of visiting the church and reporting back to those who sent them]

Having spoken of differentiation and order Paul now goes on to stress the reciprocity and interdependence of men and women, again related to biology – to the God given role of woman in Gen 1 and 2 - providing the help in her complementary humanity necessary for mankind to fill the earth

*<sup>11</sup> In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, and man is not independent of woman. <sup>12</sup> For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman, and all things come from God.*

In the Lord, and so He is talking to believers in Jesus as believers, those who already enjoy the gift of the age to come in the Spirit – there is still interdependence and reciprocity. We need each other, need each other as men and women

This is from God, the way He has ordained for the life He gives to continue

One can’t do without the other

But you can’t have expressed interdependence and reciprocity with sameness, so Paul appeals to them to think it through

*<sup>13</sup> Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? <sup>14</sup> Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair it is a disgrace to him, <sup>15</sup> but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her as a covering. <sup>16</sup> If anyone wants to argue about this, we have no other custom, nor do the churches of God.*

Judge for yourselves – Paul is not saying “Ignore all I’ve said up to here and just decide by reference to yourselves, how you feel about it. Come to a decision amongst yourselves.”

No. He is saying – in the light of all that I have said about God’s work in creation and the order of that work, and before that [1 Cor. 10:31-11:1] about respect for others, about seeking the good of others, about seeking God’s glory in all things 1 Cor. 10:31, is it proper, is it appropriate *for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?*

He is seeking to engage their thinking and expects them to answer no.

And he adds another argument, one secondary to his reflection on Genesis 2 – he asks them to think about Nature

*<sup>14</sup> Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair it is a disgrace to him, <sup>15</sup> but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her as a covering.*

Nature has a range of senses, that overlap and reinforce each other

The order intended by the Creator – Romans 1:26-27 – ‘the grain of the created order’, and Paul has already spoken of that. So here it is more an appeal to a second sense

‘the very ordering of things’, what is ‘accepted by common consent and usage’ – which can be believed to reflect the first sense

In Roman Corinth Paul’s comments would be reckoned definitely true by the second sense

For amongst the Romans long hair in a man was seen as effeminate. Generally all accepted that, which means that nature also supported what Paul says in v. 15 *if a woman has long hair, it is her glory*

Long hair – it is her glory – that is it expresses her impressiveness, as a woman, as image of God distinct from, different to, man

And adds - *For her hair is given to her as a covering*. Paul is not now contradicting himself, suggesting that long hair can function as a replacement for a veil. Rather he is saying that nature, in giving women long hair, is indicating the need for, the appropriateness of, women having a head covering

Paul is seeking a clear, recognisable, differentiation between men and women, not confusion or ambiguity.

<sup>16</sup> *If anyone wants to argue about this, we have no other custom, nor do the churches of God.*

The Corinthians may have been tempted to think they were the exceptions because of their remarkable giftedness and experience of the Spirit [cf. 4:6-8, 14:36]. No says Paul. This is the requirement in all the churches – this is the practice of the universal church

In all the churches, taught by creation, a Clear distinction between men and women is maintained

And in all gatherings the focus is on glorifying God, which means honouring our heads by not abrogating relationship, not drawing attention to our own glory

Paul is not conceding unwillingly the participation of men and women, but regulating so that no one seeks their own advantage or promotes their own cause in worship, but honour is given to the Creator God through His Son

Women’s ministry is not a concession – it is an inevitable expression of creation and salvation – of interdependence and reciprocity and mutuality, but done in a way that also acknowledges the creation differentiation and order in relationship

But there is a lot that is different in our circumstances today.

We don’t just a woman’s respectability by a head covering. ON the whole, women don’t wear head coverings.

And there are a lot more single people in our congregations, single women

So how do we apply what Paul teaches here? What does this call for from us.

## **Conclusion:**

Order respectfully expressed

Acceptance that there is an order in the relationships of men and women, of husbands and wives, and this has to be respected, acknowledged, in the way men and women, single as well as married, participate in the congregational gathering [and in marriage, and in the ordering of congregational life]

Expressed in some form of public symbolism – wedding rings

Interdependence joyfully embraced

We need each other, and so we need to promote and encourage every one's service, men and women

Distinctions maintained clearly, not confused

In our participation we need to, in dress and manner, maintain clear distinctions between men and women

Conscious that the church, our gatherings, have a wider audience

There is more – as I have suggested what Paul teaches here is an application of the message he has been promoting from the beginning of chapter 8

An attitude to be practiced 1 Cor. 10:31-11:1, esp, vv. 32-33

In all our behaviour we should not be seeking our own advantage, but rather seeking to give no offence so that people can hear the gospel

Countercultural – for the way we dress and what we do and say we are taught is all about you, about expressing yourself. In this area the most important thing is that you be true to yourself, and not let anyone else's expectation influence you.

No. We need to be true to Christ who did not seek His own advantage and humbled Himself to save us. Believers live conscious our behaviour is not merely a matter of personal preference or personal rights, but seeking the good, the salvation, of others

That Includes being conscious that what you wear matters – it always communicates

And that your participation in congregational life is not about you

We need to practice the self control [9:19-25] in all things that allows us to seek the well being of the community

And that allows us to pursue God's glory in our gathering, for that is the goal of everything we do.

A goal to be pursued 10:31 the glory of God

Who gets the glory from what you do in congregational life? And when you are asking this remember it is God who through His word teaches us how to glorify Him, how to acknowledge His greatness as our Creator

Respect for the order He has created

For the mutual interdependence which is from Him

And maintaining the distinction between men and women that is the foundation of both

As we minister together.