

# UNCOVERING THE TRUTH ABOUT HEADSHIP

by Steve Zeisler

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A few years ago as I was driving on one of our fine California highways, a sudden rainstorm made driving conditions very dangerous. It seems my brakes got wet because when I touched them the car careened off the freeway and up the embankment, coming to a halt just a few inches from a post. I remembered this incident as I studied for this message from the passage from 1 Corinthians 11 which we have come to this morning. The church in Corinth had a problem with speed; they were reluctant to ever apply the brakes and slow down. In my journey south on Highway 5, I was driving aggressively, making good time, as the saying goes, and the last thing I was thinking about was braking. That is, until I suddenly found myself sliding up a grassy slope, my car out of control. Forward progress is fine, but I am sure you agree that an integral part of that is knowing when to accelerate and when to apply the brakes. At times it is unwise to press for every advantage that seems open. The Corinthians needed to learn this lesson, as we have seen demonstrated time and again in these studies.

For instance, they fought amongst each other over which teacher-Paul, Apollos, Peter or whomever-was the more gifted. The apostle quotes them in the opening chapter as saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ" (v.12). Their knowledge and learning had resulted in their becoming puffed-up and arrogant. They treated sexual misconduct as a minor thing, hardly worthy of their attention. As a result, sexual sin of a gross nature had entered among them. They were so taken up with their rights that they summoned each other before the courts to plead their case. They pressed for every apparent advantage, foot to the floor at all times, with no thought of slowing down. They insisted on exercising their rights and freedoms-and in the main they recognized freedoms which the gospel genuinely granted them as children of God. But, as the apostle has been at pains to point out, so what if they had rights and freedoms? Were they willing to learn to restrict those rights and limit those freedoms for love's sake? If they were going to make progress in the Christian life, they needed to learn when it was time to put on the brakes.

## DIFFICULTIES IN CORPORATE WORSHIP

As we have already seen, the phrase "Now concerning..." which we have come across several times already in this letter, is an indication that the apostle is about to embark on a different topic. The opening word in 11:2 to which we come today, the word "Now," is a shortened version of this phrase, but it does introduce us to a new topic. This section, which goes all the way through chapter 14, deals with public worship. When the Corinthians met, as we are meeting today, to worship God, to hear from him and to express their gifts, they were encountering problems. They included this matter in the series of questions which they had for the apostle, and here in these chapters he gives his word on what they should do about these issues.

One problem, which we will look at next week, was that some wealthy Christians were flaunting their position and taking advantage of the less fortunate among them. This became apparent when they met for "the Lord's Supper" together as a body, leading Paul to ask the pointed question of 11:22, "...do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing?"

Later, he takes to task those who because of their spiritual gifts felt they had no need of others in the body. And in chapter 14 he addresses those who were speaking in tongues in so loud and competitive a manner that strangers who heard them imagined they were mad. We will meet all of these problems in later messages.

## MEN AND WOMEN

The issue which we will look at today, however, concerns the need for men and women to understand one another so that the worship experience which they share together is harmonious rather than divisive. Apparently, a group of women in Corinth who had discovered that they had new rights and freedoms--here we go again--had, in the exercise of those rights, made it difficult for others among them to participate in public worship. Here is what Paul has to say about this problem. 11:2:

Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. 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. Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying, disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head; for she is one and the same with her whose head is shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also 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 cover her head. For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but the woman for the man's sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority over her head, because of the angels. However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

In our day as no other time in history perhaps, male and female roles have come under intense scrutiny. This is one issue that is almost certain to cause debate and division whenever it is raised. But even if feminism were in no way controversial today, this would still be a difficult passage for the simple reason that we are looking at a question which was at issue, in a Mediterranean setting, almost two thousand years ago. We do not dress the same way today. We do not conduct our worship meetings the same way they did.

Furthermore, to make things even more difficult, there are problems with the Greek syntax in this passage. For example, it is very difficult to determine what is meant by the words in verse 10, "...the woman ought to have power on her head" (KJV). Add to that the fact that the word which is translated "head," the most important word in this section, has been the subject of much debate during the past 10 to 15 years. The scholars differ as to whether the word, when used metaphorically, has the sense of "source," "authority," "prominence," or some combination of those words. Finally, we have added difficulty with this section because Paul himself frequently changes the basis of his argument. At various points he argues and makes his case on the basis of tradition, creation, physiology, common sense, and the nature of things. The result is an argument that is tightly woven, requiring effort on our part to follow. Let us fasten our seatbelts and trust God to teach us the truth of this passage.

## **CULTURE AND CREATION**

First, as we have noted, in his advice the apostle at times refers to the customs and traditions of the Corinthian setting--and customs and traditions change. Covering the head had a clear, symbolic meaning in Corinth in the first century, I do not see even one woman wearing a hat in church this morning. Twentieth century customs make no such demands on women. Thus we must understand the point which Paul is making in order to make the application.

But, on the other hand, the apostle is also saying that certain things are always true no matter what the age. These are the things that are true by nature. No matter what the culture, therefore, these do not change. It is important that we make this distinction.

Headship, according to Paul, is a condition that does not change with the age or with the culture. Verse 3 renders this concept in very clear terms: "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." The Father is eternally head of the Son. Using the insights drawn from the creation account in Genesis 2, Paul notes that the man, having been created first, will always-no matter what the culture or era-be head of the woman. However, the apostle wisely observes that human origins teach a second truth. Every man since Adam originates from a woman-his mother-and therefore the equality and interdependence of men and women must be asserted in addition to upholding the important concept of male headship.

Having called attention to matters which never change (headship and equality), we need to distinguish which particulars in this passage were significant in first century Corinth but are not so today. Further, we should do some careful thinking about what actions, perfectly innocent in themselves, have the capacity to "make a statement" in our setting which mature Christians therefore will refrain from.

Regarding the Corinthian culture of that day, I will read a quote from David Prior's commentary:

In first century Greece, dress for men and women was apparently very similar, except for the women's 'head-covering' (here called kalumma or 'veil'). This, incidentally, was not the equivalent of the Arab veil, but a covering for her hair alone. The normal, everyday dress of all Greek women included this kalumma. The only women who did not wear them were the hetairai, who were the 'high-class' mistresses of influential Corinthians. Also, slaves had their heads shaved, and the same practice was enacted as punishment for convicted adultresses. It has been further suggested that the sacred prostitutes from the local temple of Aphrodite did not wear veils.

Evidently, some of the Corinthian women believers, in an expression of their new-found freedom, were unbinding their hair in church. Such action was so likely to be misinterpreted that the apostle directs them to stop the practice, lest their "head" be dishonored.

Obviously, Paul uses the word "head" here in two different senses: at times with reference to the physical head-the part that sits atop the shoulders-and also, with reference to someone with whom you have a relationship-your husband, your spiritual head, whomever. We should be careful to make this distinction when we come across this word "head" in this section. What Paul is saying is that the Corinthian women had a head, either the male leadership in the church, or, more likely, their husbands. For a women then to come into a public worship setting and in an expression of freedom unbind her hair, would be dishonorable to her head. It would disgrace and limit him in his worship. We are back to the old argument: insistence on one's rights at times may be hurtful to others. This symbolic action declared that the one doing it was so unconcerned for the standing of her head, her husband, that she did not mind being mistaken for his mistress, or as a prostitute.

## **HEADSHIP AND HAIR**

Now let us try to understand what is meant here by headship. When you meet someone, the first thing you notice about the person is his or her head. The head is the focal point, the highest, most prominent part of the body. I believe that it is this idea of prominence in relationships that Paul is getting at here. For instance, God the Father and Jesus are co-equal, co-eternal, but God the Father is the prominent figure in that relationship. Jesus' role, he himself said, was to "glorify My Father." The same thing is true in the relationship between husband and wife.

Now let me say right away that this does not mean that men are more worthy, more valuable or smarter or anything like that. Prominence implies authority in a relationship, but this passage is not about submission to authority; it is about honor and disgrace. Generally speaking, in most relationships between men and women, the man is the more prominent figure. Men are taller than women, as a rule, although for a period in the early teen years girls do grow taller than boys, to everyone's discomfort.

But on the whole, men are taller, and thus more prominent, than women. In the animal world this is also true. The male lion with its mane, the colorfully plumed peacock are two examples of prominence in the male species. This says nothing about their value. Male lions, for instance, are notorious for their laziness. Visually, however, they are more prominent than lionesses. By the way, I am glad to see that the wife's adoption of her husband's surname has come back into vogue. For a while it seemed many women wanted to either retain their own names or use hyphenated versions of both names. This practice seems to be on the wane as women are recognizing their husbands' headship by taking their names.

There are many ways therefore by which we could conclude from observation (in addition to the teaching of Genesis) that in a human pair the male is the more prominent figure. Paul's exhortation then, is, "Wives, when you sit in church with your husband, do not disgrace the one who has prominence in your relationship." There is nothing wrong with women expressing their gifts; Paul is merely encouraging them to do things properly. "Pray and prophesy," he is saying, "in such a way that your husband is not dishonored." God designed things so that the man is the more prominent figure in a pair of spiritual equals who need one another. God made us to be dependent upon one another. Woman originated from man. Men originate from women. But a Christian wife has a head, and she needs to recognize that when she worships.

Let us look briefly at the natural symbolism of hair as Paul describes it, beginning in verse 14. Long hair, says the apostle, is disgraceful on a man but proper for a woman. Verse 14: "Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her?" When I was a long-haired young Christian, back in the '60's, I had trouble with this verse. With time, though, I have come to see what Paul means. "Long" hair, of course, is a relative term. Long compared to what? we could ask. I don't think the apostle's concern here is with measuring strands of hair, rather I think he is talking about beautiful hair. Other New Testament letters (1 Peter 3:3; 1 Tim.2:9) speak of the beautiful and attractive qualities of women's hair, worn in long braids and adorned with jewelry. I think that is the quality Paul is referring to when he speaks of "long" hair in this passage. Long-beautiful-hair is appropriate for a woman, inappropriate for a man. Men are most often concerned that their appearance proclaim them to be successful, authoritative, or potent. Women, even in this age of "dress for success," naturally retain a concern for beauty. If a man seems overly concerned with being "pretty," we tend to question his masculinity. Paul is raising the question of propriety here. Nature may teach us these things in that men as a rule tend to go bald in their later years, while women as a general rule retain their hair.

When the Corinthians worshiped, therefore, Paul says that a man should worship with his head uncovered, and woman with covered head. The man symbolically represents one aspect of humanity at worship, and the woman represents another. Both are needed. Second Corinthians 3:18 helps us with the man's symbolic role: "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit." Pagan worship, by contrast, is a thing of darkness; it is hidden and mystical, unattractive and uninviting. Christian worship should have an open quality about it. Redeemed humanity is the apex of God's creation, reflecting, in a sense, God's greatness, "from glory to glory." When husband and wife worship together, the man without any covering (even long hair) boldly thanks and praises God-the one creature made in the image of the Creator. But the human pair must also indicate humility in worship. We have nothing to offer anything in creation (including angels who observe us for their own instruction) if independent human glory should assert itself. The woman, whose beautiful hair well represents the glory of man, can symbolically make this second point-we humbly depend on God for everything-by covering her hair. Either message-boldness or humility-would be inadequate without the other.

So both man and woman are necessary for worship. The majestic expression alone, without the factor of humility, or humility alone, without some sense of the majestic expression, are incomplete. Both are needed. That is why Christian men and women ought to worship together. There is nothing demeaning or diminishing about being given either role; both are necessary in order for Christian worship to be full.

## **PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS**

How does this apply directly to us as a body? First, I would say that women should consider their relationships with their husbands. If you are acting in a way that undermines your husband, then you should

rethink what you are doing. He is not necessarily more capable or better than you, but he is the head, the prominent one in your relationship. Most of the world will see your relationship in that light. Thus you demean yourself if you bring dishonor to him.

The recent revelations concerning President and Nancy Reagan's interest in astrology make my point here. Mrs. Reagan is an extraordinarily powerful woman. She is probably one of the most powerful people in the world today. It is clear that she has influence in her husband's life. Her influence installs and removes Cabinet members; she gives advice on international affairs. But recent revelations of her dabbling in astrology have brought dishonor to her husband. Her choices to do so have brought disgrace upon him; and she, too, has been diminished. For Christians, that is wrong behavior, no matter what reasons are offered.

Secondly, I would like to say here that tradition is good. Paul opens this section by commending the Corinthians for recognizing the value of tradition. There is nothing wrong with using traditions to make statements. We do not have many traditions here in our church, although we perhaps have become so used to some of them we do not easily see them. We recently had a discussion about the show drums which were on the platform during a service. This is hardly traditional at PBC. The discussion did not center on whether drums should or should not be used in worship. All agreed that percussive instruments do have a place in worship. The question that was asked, however, concerned the wisdom of displaying a set of drums here when in fact there was no need to do so. Paul is perfectly willing to uphold tradition; there is nothing wrong with it. We, too, should be willing to do likewise.

This passage does not forbid ministry; we should be clear about that. It is not saying that women should cease prophesying and praying in public. What the apostle is appealing for, rather, is that we do it right. Choosing to limit our freedoms does not abolish them.

I am enthusiastic about this section of 1 Corinthians regarding how Christians should worship. It is important that when we meet together as a church, we are doing something that is unique. As redeemed humanity, we can reflect back God's glory to him. This requires the gifts and contributions of us all. Let us do it wisely, so that all may participate, and in a way that none will be hurt in the process.

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