

# WOMEN PRAYING AND PROPHECYING

## *SERIES: LIFESTYLE ISSUES IN THE CHURCH*

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Our passage of Scripture in this message deals with the public worship life of the church. Let's jump right into some of the practical application of the passage for a moment, without considering any historical context or theological explanation of the issues. First Corinthians 11:4-6: "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." If we take this at face value, the men in our congregation are doing okay, but the women might be in trouble-I don't see many head-coverings.

On the recent trip that our pastors took to Romania, ministering in churches there and in three conferences with Romanian pastors, I realized how culturally determined both our dress and our deportment together in worship services are. In any Romanian congregation you choose to worship with, whether Catholic, Romanian Orthodox, or Protestant, the men are dressed plainly in suits and ties, usually dark colors. The women have their arms covered and their legs covered with long skirts-no slacks. They too are dressed in plain dark colors. Every woman's head in a Romanian church is covered by a scarf, shawl, or hat. The men and the women sit on opposite sides of the aisle in the congregation. Women are completely silent in the worship services. The men do all of the leading, praying, and preaching. Obviously, our lifestyle of worship at PBC is very different. There is no discernible dress code, except perhaps the code of diversity. Our women are not silent. The last two Sunday mornings that we've enjoyed together in worship here, gifted women have led us in music, prayer, worship, and Scripture reading. And just before Christmas, Kathy Means, our pastor for Children's Ministry, taught the word of God from this pulpit on a Sunday morning.

In all three of the conferences that we did with Pentecostal pastors, Baptist pastors, and Brethren elders in Romania, these issues of dress and deportment, specifically head-coverings, came up, for several reasons. For one, we were dealing with a passage in 1 Timothy 2 that talks about women's submitting to headship in the body of Christ, and immediately these pastors would jump to 1 Corinthians 11 and ask about head-coverings in the church. We were also open with them about how our pastoral staff includes both men and women who are spiritually gifted as pastor-teachers. And then these issues came up because some of the women in the Romanian churches are getting sort of feisty and wearing cute, colored hats to church. So the pastors have to deal with these issues.

Now let's back up and get a running start on the passage by putting those three verses we read into historical context, and by understanding Paul's theological explanation of those verses.

In the closing section of the passage we looked at in the last message (Discovery Paper 4527), in the first couple of verses of chapter 11 Paul addressed hard issues. He addressed motivation for how we live life, serve one another, and minister. We could also use these verses to examine our attitudes about why we come to church, how we dress, and how we view our participation in our public life of worship at PBC, both as leaders and as members of the congregation, as men and as women.

### GLORIFYING GOD

In 11:2 Paul is going to conclude this little opening section with a wonderful word of commendation and encouragement to his Corinthian brothers and sisters. Let's read 10:31-11:2:

**Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved.**

**Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.**

**Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.**

This is Paul's motivational context for the discussion that is going to follow. The concern is that men and women worship God together in a way that is glorifying to him. The phrase in both verses 4 and 5 that we read earlier, "praying or prophesying," speaks of the context of corporate worship.

Now, Corinth had incredible worship, vibrant with praise. It was probably the most exciting church Paul had a relationship with in all the empire. Every spiritual gift was in full expression, and there was much passion and energy, preaching, and teaching.

But we're going to see beginning here in chapter 11 and going all the way through chapter 14 that Paul was concerned about disorder. There were serious problems in the worship life of this congregation. There were wrong motives at work in some of the people, self-aggrandizement instead of concern for God's glory driving a lot of the participation.

In this message we're going to examine the confusion over women's participation in worship. In the next message we'll look at the problems surrounding the Lord's table. In the following two messages we'll look at chapter 12, where Paul addresses the confusion about spiritual gifting and the nature of the body at work.

But here in 11:2 Paul begins with encouragement and commendation. He's not flattering them; his praise is really sincere. There might have been something out of line in their lives when they gathered together, but the love and respect that most of them had for Paul was genuine, and he knew that. And even though there was confusion over some of these Biblical traditions regarding worship that Paul had taught them, he trusted that they really did want to submit to his apostolic authority, and so in these verses he patiently corrects their misunderstandings with spiritual principles from the word of God.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HEAD-COVERING

Now, as you can tell from verses 4-6, which we read at the beginning, there was confusion in public worship over the freedom that women had to pray and to prophesy. Some apparently were exercising this freedom more than they should have in refusing to wear the head-coverings that were normative in that historical setting.

Let me give you some context for this. The gospel that Jesus offered was revolutionary in terms of the freedom and equality it offered to women, children, and the slave population of the Roman Empire. Christianity proclaimed that all people were on equal footing before the Creator God, and that all believers were one in Jesus Christ. The local church was the only community in the Roman Empire that welcomed all people regardless of nationality, social class, gender, or economic status.

If you think about the study that we've come through to this point in 1 Corinthians, and remember what that church was like, it really isn't surprising to find out that some of the new believers in Corinth would carry this radical freedom in Christ to excess. So some of the women flaunted their freedom in Christ, refusing to cover their heads in public worship. Eastern society at that time was very jealous over its women. And except for temple prostitutes and high-class courtesans of wealthy Corinthian men, women tended to wear their hair long, and out in public they wore a scarf or a shawl-like covering over their head. Mistresses or temple prostitutes might shave their heads or wear their hair close-cropped without any covering at all. Across Jewish and Greek and Roman cultures, the head-covering was a symbol of sexual purity. And for a married woman, it was a symbol of her loyalty to her husband, of her acceptance of his leadership in the

relationship. It would be like the wedding bands that a man and a woman wear today. So for a Christian woman in the church to appear in public without that covering, let alone to pray or to share the word in worship, was both culturally offensive, and from Paul's perspective, confusing to nonbelievers who were trying to understand what this new community of faith stood for in terms of values and relationships.

## THE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE OF HEADSHIP AND SUBMISSION

So Paul responds by explaining a Biblical tradition, or an ordinance or teaching. God has defined a difference between men and women in his economy. Each have a proper place. There are appropriate customs to symbolize the relationships. In verses 3-6 Paul is going to introduce a universal spiritual principle, that of headship and the response of submission. He is going to define the principle in verse 3 and then apply it specifically in Corinth in verses 4-6. Verse 3:

**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.**

This principle is foundational for order in the church. There is a divinely ordained pattern for certain relationships in the Christian community, and there is a definite order of headship here. God the Father is head over Christ the Son. Christ is head over the man. And the man is head over the woman. And even though there's a clear difference of function for each person and each place in the order, there's no hint, in either God the Father's relationship to Christ or in the man's relationship to the woman, of inequality or superiority in nature. But this order does imply leadership responsibility and authority.

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul calls Christ the head (the same word, *kephale*), of the church, which is his body. It means that Jesus is the leader of the church. He has the right to set the ultimate direction of that relationship. Yet when Jesus was here on earth carrying out his redemptive ministry, he was always in submission to his heavenly Father and did that which pleased his Father, even though he has always been equal to the Father as deity. In the same way, the woman is submissive to the man even though in Christ she has full equality with the man.

Now, if you look carefully at that first phrase in verse 3, it talks about the headship of Jesus Christ over men, and implicitly, our submission to him. He is the Lord. And men are called to exercise their headship, if you will, the same way that Jesus Christ exercises his. In Mark 10:42-45 Jesus explained to his disciples the nature of the leadership they were to have in the church: "And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, 'You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.' That's the leadership that men are called to: servanthood, slavery, living sacrificially for the good of others.

Now, Biblically, there are really only two spheres in which men have a right to exercise headship. One is Christian marriage, in which the husband is the head of the wife (Ephesians 5; 1 Peter 3). The other is the church (1 Timothy 2-3), in which a group of elders who are men are called to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord and to submit to one another, and then that group of men is to serve the body sacrificially with their leadership.

## APPLICATION IN CORPORATE WORSHIP

Paul applies the spiritual principle of headship and submission specifically in verses 4-6 in the context of praying and prophesying in public worship.

**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.**

The first important point I want to make from those three verses is that men and women were equally free to exercise ministry, to pray and prophesy when the church gathered. The issue Paul was concerned with was that of heart attitude. As we're going to see in chapter 14, prophesying is very close to what we would call teaching or preaching today. It's reflecting or illuminating the word of God. Women in the early church who had the gift of prophecy were free to exercise it. They were also permitted to pray in public meetings. But in 1 Timothy 3, Paul doesn't permit women to be elders. In 1 Timothy 2 he doesn't permit women to usurp authority over the men who were in leadership of the church.

But again, at the heart of Paul's concern here is the ministry of the word in public worship. And so with that setting, how men and women dressed and what they looked like was important. Paul says in that first-century Corinthian setting that men should not have their heads covered, and women should have their heads covered. That conformed to then-current cultural standards, and it was symbolic of their acceptance of the spiritual principle of headship and submission. It expressed the men's submission to the headship of Jesus Christ, and the women's submission to the spiritual leadership of their husbands and to church leadership.

The disgrace Paul mentions that could result if these public conventions were ignored would be (1) a distraction or confusion for other people in worship, (2) the dishonoring of the uncovered woman's husband in his role as spiritual leader, (3) an undermining of the spiritual authority of the elders in the church, and (4) a disappointment to the Lord, who established this timeless principle of headship and submission, and who was reading the hearts of the rebellious men or women who refused to conform.

Now what Paul does in verses 7-16 is give an explanation of this spiritual principle of headship and submission. He makes three different arguments to defend this tradition or ordinance. In verses 7-12 he offers a Biblical argument from the order of creation. In verses 13-15 he offers a common-sense argument from the pattern of nature, as he calls it. And finally in verse 16 he offers an argument from apostolic authority.

## HEADSHIP AND SUBMISSION IN THE CREATED ORDER

Let's look first at this argument from the order of creation. We'll read verses 7-9, where Paul briefly summarizes God's creativity at work in his purposes for men and women.

**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 woman for the man's sake.**

This principle of headship and submission has been true since God created the world. And the creation narratives in Genesis show that both man and woman equally bear the image and the glory of God. Genesis 1:26-27: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness'...And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Genesis 5:1-2 again summarizes the creation order: "In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man [Adam] in the day when they were created." But in Genesis 2 when God created Eve, he took her from Adam's rib. So Paul says she was created from the man. Genesis 2 also tells us that God created woman to meet a specific need that man had. There was an incompleteness in man. He created her to be a help, a strength, a corresponding contribution that man was desperately in need of. And because of that, in addition to reflecting the glory of God, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:7, she also reflects the glory of man. The woman will glorify God, and she will also bring glory to the man by submitting to God's order. And again, this priority of creation doesn't imply male superiority or female inferiority. We are equal, but we are called to different functions in leadership and response. Because God established this order of creation, it can't be explained away as culturally conditioned.

Paul goes on in verse 10:

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

angels.

A Christian woman's head-covering is a sign or a symbol of her submission to the principle of headship, and that humility before the Lord and her husband then gives her the spiritual authority to pray and prophesy in church, to exercise ministry in the freedom of the Spirit. I'm honestly not sure what the angels have to do with this, but the Scriptures tell us that angels are attentive observers of church life and practice. In Isaiah 6:2 we're told that angels veil their faces in humility when they worship before the throne of God. Perhaps Paul is encouraging women to worship with that same submissive humility as those angelic ministers.

Now in verses 11-12 there's a wonderful, strong emphasis on the mutuality of men and women in marriage in the church. Paul is still arguing from the creation order, and from the beginning, it was clear that there was mutual interdependence.

**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.**

The phrase "in the Lord" in verse 11 clearly envisions Christian marriage and life in the body of Christ (as opposed to relationships in the world). And this mutual dependence of man and woman speaks of full equality in personhood. Peter says that we are "fellow heirs of the grace of life" (1 Peter 3:7). We can't get along without each other. Paul is concerned to promote love between the sexes. Neither of them, because of their different positions or advantages, should consider themselves better, or treat the other with contempt or condescension. Paul says in verse 12 that this mutual dependence of the man and the woman is grounded in creation. The first woman, Eve, was originally created from the man. But from that point on, every single man is birthed by a mother. He says their inter-dependence is also grounded in the Lord himself. All things are from God, which gives us another reason for humility in the relationships between believing men and women.

#### FEMININE APPEARANCE AND SUBMISSION

Now let's look at the second argument, in which Paul appeals to common sense, or what is readily observable as a pattern in nature. Verses 13-15:

**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 for her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.**

Now, if I were writing this, I probably wouldn't have appealed to nature. But I'm not an inspired apostle. Paul says that if these Corinthians just looked around them at the natural lengths and styles of men's and women's hair, then they could decide for themselves this issue of how women's head-coverings symbolized their submission to the principle of headship. In this regard, men and women are generally distinguishable. The Greek word in the text for long hair can also mean beautiful hair or beautifully braided long hair. And since the Bible nowhere says exactly how long hair ought to be, I think Paul is just talking about how women naturally tend toward longer, beautifully styled hair. In 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Peter 3, Paul and Peter, respectively, tell about the beautifully attractive qualities of women's hair. Paul says a woman's hair is her glory. He doesn't say a man's hair is his glory. And he says a woman's hair represents a natural head-covering that God has given her, even if she doesn't have on a scarf or a shawl. I think beautifully styled hair is appropriate for women, and inappropriate for men. Women are concerned with beauty, and men are concerned with utility, by and large. There are exceptions, of course, on both sides. But Paul is concerned that there not be confusion of the sexes. He is ruling out androgyny or any kind of unisex appearance that would confuse people. Paul says that it's not only common but good and right for women to wear longer hair than men, and to have distinctively feminine hair styles, because it symbolizes in some way their submission to the lordship of Christ and their willingness to follow the men that God has put in authority in their lives.

proper head-coverings to distinguish themselves as submissive to God's principle of headship. As I've traveled to different parts of the world, I've noticed that this basic principle of headship applies in every culture, but the way it's demonstrated differs from place to place. The important thing here is the submission of the heart to the Lord, and the public manifestation of obedience to God's order.

## THE AUTHORITY OF THE APOSTLES

The final appeal is to apostolic authority in verse 16:

**But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.**

As in almost every age and every church, some of the believers in Corinth weren't satisfied with God's order of priority. They wanted to disregard it or modify it to suit themselves. Paul anticipates the objection to what he's just taught, and he declares that neither God, who is represented by the apostles, nor the faithful congregations in his churches will recognize any other foundational principles of leadership.

Now let me try to tie this together in conclusion. The churches around the world may share common spiritual problems, and Biblical principles are provided for universal solutions. But the local, historical, and cultural manifestations of the problems are not universal. The ways we live, function, dress, and behave in Palo Alto, California are different from the ways of our brothers and sisters in Cluj, Romania. In our studies in chapters 8-10 Paul gave instruction concerning the eating of meat offered to idols. The spiritual problem there was the use of freedom in Christ. The cultural, historical expression was the idol temples of Corinth. We don't live in an age or cultural setting where we have to deal with meat offered to idols (although there are some Christians who live in Asia who may have to face that issue). But every one of us has to deal with the problem of the exercise of our Christian liberty in our own cultural setting on the edge of the twenty-first century.

And just as with meat offered to idols, there was nothing in the wearing or not wearing of the head-covering itself that was right or wrong. Some of the women in Corinth, to their credit, had come to understand that. The spiritual problem was the rebellion of some women against the God-ordained roles. In Corinth that rebellion was demonstrated by their praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered. Dress and hairstyle are largely cultural, and unless what a person wears is sexually suggestive, or it indicates real gender confusion, it has no moral or spiritual significance. Paul is not laying down a universal mandate that Christian women should always worship with their heads covered. It's the spiritual principle of women's submission to the headship of husbands and to the leadership of the church that Paul is teaching in this passage, not any particular external mark or symbol of that submission. You see, the issue is not what we're wearing on our heads, but what is in our hearts. Remember, the Scriptures say that humans look at the outward appearance, but God is always looking at our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7). What counts is the spiritual reality, not the symbol.

I am very grateful for men and women at PBC who model this beautifully complementary relationship in their marriages and in their participation in the life of the body here. I'm thankful for men who have repented of lording it over women and are learning to serve women sacrificially as Jesus does. I'm really grateful for women here who have repented of competition with men and are learning to creatively give us the strong help that we desperately need, supportively and encouragingly. I've watched many marriages, both younger couples and older couples, and some of them have taught Candy and me how better to submit to each other out of reverence for Christ.

I am very grateful for the spiritually gifted women whom God has placed in leadership here at PBC. We shared, as I said, in all three of the Romanian pastoral conferences the spiritual health and life and blessing God has given us as we've worked together on a pastoral staff of both men and women who are learning the dynamics of complementary relationships, affirming the goodness of being created male and female. When I got here twenty years ago, our staff was a hundred percent male, and the staff meetings were rowdy and rough-and-tumble, having the dynamics of a men's locker room. I loved the first generation of leaders here, and I'm grateful for the years I had as a young man. But the spiritual dynamics at work now among the leadership are much healthier, much more life-giving.

Every one of us needs to re-examine our understanding of God's plan for us as men and women in light of this passage. Remember, above all else we're to be sold out to living to the glory of God. Men and women alike are called to submission to his leadership. As in Corinth, the world is watching us to see how our relationships work, to see if the gospel that we proclaim mediates love and mutual submission in our relationships as men and women. The question is, do the men reflect the loving headship of Christ in their marriages and where God has called them to leadership in the church? And do the women reflect the loving submission of Christ in their marriages and in relationship to the leadership of the church?

I want to close with a reading from Jesus' high-priestly prayer in John 17:17-23. Watch very carefully the fluid movement in Jesus' thinking. He is equal with his Father in nature, in personhood. But we see his submission to his Father in his redemptive ministry on earth, in the saving function that God called him to.

**"Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth. As Thou didst send Me into the world [here is Jesus' submission to the Father], I also have sent them into the world [here he is functioning as the head]. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself [by going to the cross the next day, giving up his life], that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one, even as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee; that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me."**

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