

**“Gotcha Covered”**  
***I Corinthians 11:2-16***

This morning is the perfect example of why many pastors preach only topical messages. If you want to, you can avoid difficult passages such as the one we will tackle today.

Paul moves on from the subject of idolatry (chapters 8-10) to that of public worship. In this letter to the Corinthians, he has been addressing issues raised both by oral report from those traveling from Corinth and those raised in a letter from the church to Paul. We probably have both at play in chapters 11 through 14.

The subjects that Paul addresses have to do with the role of women in public worship, the observance of the sacrament of communion – the Lord’s Supper, spiritual gifts and their exercise in the church, in particular the exercise of the gift of tongues and prophecy, and how the worship service should be conducted in an orderly fashion.

He begins and ends this section dealing with women in public worship. On the surface, they appear to contradict each other. In the beginning of chapter eleven, he notes, without censure, women praying and prophesying in the worship service, and then at the end of chapter 14, he says they ought to be silent in public worship. What’s going on?

This morning, I am not going to try to reconcile the two, but will wait until we get to the latter passage. We will have our hands full just dealing with the first passage today.

These verses in chapter 11 have been used by some over the centuries to support a theology of the inferiority of women and the subservience of women to men. Right away, I want to say that I don’t believe this is what Paul is teaching.

Paul is not putting down women in this passage. We know from the book of Acts that many high-profile women were responsive to Paul’s ministry and drawn to his work. It is hard to believe that would be true if Paul’s message was one of downgrading women.

This is a passage that has perplexed Greek scholars over the meaning of several words used by Paul. Sincere, evangelical men and women have differed in their interpretations of Paul’s teaching and, I must confess, it really isn’t all clear-cut. The interpreter must make some assumptions and draw conclusions that will be at odds with other equally sincere folks wrestling with the text. Honestly, we all have our biases when it comes to a text like this.

I will try to honestly represent some of the varied views so you can see the difficulties involved. Then I want to conclude by drawing applications of the text today to our contemporary setting.

Turn in your Bible to the book of First Corinthians, chapter eleven.

## **I Corinthians 11:2-16**

This is a passage, like all others, that requires that we understand the context. We cannot just lift these verses out of their cultural and biblical setting, put on a table, and then dissect the words. On one occasion, Donald Grey Barnhouse, preaching on the subject of marriage, told a story from his family to illustrate this problem. His children used to amuse themselves with their push-button radio by listening to one program, then in the middle of a sentence, pushing the button and joining another program in mid-stream. For example they might be listening to a political speech and hear the words: “And I promise ...” The button was pushed and the sentence continued: “Strike three! You’re out!”

Barnhouse told of one incident – this is true, when they were listening to the broadcast of the marriage of Queen Elizabeth of England to Philip. The minister said: “Do you, Philip, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife ...” The button was pushed and the radio continued with the account of a prize fight: “Shake hands, go to your corners and come out fighting at the bell.”

So, what’s going on in Corinth that brings this question to Paul’s attention: “Should women cover their heads while praying or prophesying in the public worship service?”

Before Paul speaks to the issue, he lays down a broad biblical principle to provide the broadest context for his teaching. That is, every human being has a “head.” Now, it’s not as simple as that sounds. Look again at verse three.

## **I Corinthians 11:3**

Before we tackle the meaning of “head,” we need to understand who it is that Paul is addressing here. Is Paul using the words “man” and “woman” generally, or does he really mean “husband” and “wife.” The ESV has chosen to speak of husbands and wives, while translations like the NIV and the New American Standard uses the more general “man” and “woman.”

Here’s the problem: the same Greek words used for man and woman are translated in some passages as husband and wife. Ephesians, chapter five, is a good example of that where, in the context of marriage, Paul says that the husband is to love his wife and the wife is to respect her husband.

That being the case, it is the context which determines how we should interpret the usage of the words. You can see how your interpretation might be changed if Paul is taking about husbands and wives in these verses rather than men and women in general.

I lean towards the context indicating that Paul is speaking broadly about men and women. One of the reasons is that he goes on in verses eight and nine to ground his teaching in the creation account. Though Adam and Eve were the first married couple, it is more significant that they were the first humans.

Second, even though Paul might be most concerned here about a wife dishonoring her husband in public worship, does he have a different standard for single women who would have been part of the Corinthian church? Where do they fit into Paul's teaching?

If Paul is using the broad categories, this is what he states in principle:

- The head of every man is Christ
- The head of a woman is man
- The head of Christ is God

Every person has a "head." Paul does not have anatomy in mind, so what does that mean? Greek scholars suggest three possible meanings for the word "head." The first is that it speaks of hierarchy and implies subordination. The woman is subordinated to the man. Therefore, man has authority over woman. But this doesn't really fit the context or other general teaching in Scripture.

Christians are told by Paul in the book of Ephesians to submit to one another. Wives are instructed to submit to their husbands. There isn't a general teaching: all women should submit to all men, and that's just the way it is.

The second possibility is that the word means "source." The source of man is Christ; the source of woman is man; the source of Christ is God. That could be right though there are some problems with such use in the Greek language. The third option is to see "head" meaning, in the words of A.C. Perriman, "*that which is most prominent, foremost, uppermost, pre-eminent.*"

This seems to be the most appropriate usage in that there is one who has priority as head. We see this in Paul's teaching about marriage in Ephesians five. David Garland makes this point about such headship:

Paul's primary intent, then, is not to assert the supremacy of man and the insubordination of woman. Instead, it is to establish that each has a head and that "what one does or doesn't put on one's physical head either honors or dishonors one's spiritual head" (Craig Blomberg).

Paul begins with men who are praying or prophesying with a covered head. This might mean one of two things. The phrase is literally "having down from the head." Some have

interpreted this to mean long hair, since Paul will talk about long hair later in the passage. In that culture, men did not wear their hair long. It was, most often, worn that way by those who were effeminate or homosexual.

The more traditional interpretation is that Paul was referring to a head covering, similar to what Roman men wore in their pagan religious practices of worship. Paul is referring a toga pulled over one's head and hanging down. He says that it is shameful for men in Christian worship to appear as those who are participating in pagan worship.

Then he turns his attention to women who were praying and prophesying in the public worship service without their heads covered. What's happening culturally here has direct bearing on the reason for Paul's admonishment.

In Jewish culture, respectable women covered their heads in public. In the Greco-Roman world, for the most part, women also covered their heads. One group of women, particularly, did not: those who were prostitutes.

The coverings Paul refers to might have been of cloth or perhaps he is just talking about long hair or perhaps wearing their hair up. Blomberg suggests that the reference to the hair cut short might be "to the shaven heads of a convicted adulteress in Jewish circles or of the more 'masculine' partner in a lesbian relationship in the Greek world."

Women are being encouraged to not give off wrong impressions in the exercise of their Christian freedom. Instead, they are to do what was right in that cultural setting, giving honor to the particular men in their lives, whether a husband, father, or head of the household.

Some see here a concern for the impropriety of men focusing on the women who were uncovered rather than upon God whom they were worshipping.

David Garland summarizes the point when he writes: "[Paul] is not trying to repress women and to restrain their expression of spiritual gifts but to impress on them the need to project modesty and virtue in their dress."

In verses nine and ten, Paul draws from the creation account a balanced perspective on men and women. Kenneth Bailey, in his book *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*, makes an interesting point. The Greek preposition *dia* is used four times in the same way. The word can mean "for" or "because of" or "on account of."

Translators have often rendered these two verses in this way:

For man was not created *for* [*dia*] woman  
but woman *for* [*dia*] man

*Because of* [*dia*] this  
the woman should have authority on the head  
*because of* [*dia*] the angels.

You can see that by translating *dia* as “for” in the first two lines and *dia* as *because of* in the next three lines one can arrive at the view that woman was made for man, therefore, woman should be subject to and serve man.

But, Bailey suggests, what happens if you translate the preposition the same in all the lines? Then it could read:

For the man was not created *because of* the woman  
but the woman *because of* the man.

*Because of* this  
the woman should have authority on the head  
*because of* the angels.

Paul is taking us back into the creation account of Genesis, chapter two. There we read:

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” – *Genesis 2:18*

See, the woman was created to do man’s laundry! She is to be his helper. Fortunately, that’s not what the word means. Merrill Unger, in his *Bible Dictionary*, defines the word as:

Helpmeet: *a help as his counterpart*, i.e. an aid suitable to him, such as the man stood in need of.

Adam was in need of help, so God took a rib out of Adam’s side and fashioned the woman. Interestingly, this Hebrew word is used of God as God came to help or save Israel. As Bailey notes, “This word does not refer to a lowly assistant, but to a powerful figure who comes to help/save someone who is in trouble.”

Paul goes on further to show the interdependence of men and women – **Verses 11 and 12.**

This is the same sense of his teaching on the mutual responsibilities of husbands and wives in the sexual aspect of married life that we saw back in chapter seven. Here Paul

reminds them that they – men and women, in essence, derive their existence each from or through the other.

Far from Paul being a first-century chauvinist, he is one who advocates equality and mutual dependence without abandoning the differentiation of roles through the created order.

That is why Paul teaches, in verse ten, that the woman was to have “a symbol of authority on her head.” The woman is to exercise control over her head. In this way she “demonstrates her faithfulness to her husband or her acknowledgment of her status” (J.D.BeDuhn).

There is no prohibition for a woman to pray or prophesy in the public worship. But, that requires authority and the sign of their authority is their head covering. M.D. Hooker writes:

Far from being a symbol of women’s subjection to men, therefore, her head-covering is what Paul calls it – authority: in prayer and prophecy she, like the man, is under the authority of God.

Paul uses a further argument from nature – speaking of the length of one’s hair and what that meant in the first-century culture in Corinth. It was a disgrace for men to have long hair and for women to have short hair. Again, in that culture, those men who were involved in homosexual behavior often had long hair; women who cut their hair short were often the “masculine” partner in a lesbian relationship or prostitutes.

Paul appeals for propriety on the part of Christian men and women who participate in public worship. This is both a reflection of who they were in God’s created order as they came to worship and the influence/impact they had on the other worshippers.

Let’s draw some applications to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. There are several things we should think about.

1) Man and woman were both created in the image of God and, therefore, have equal, intrinsic value to God. The New Testament teaches that in relation to experiencing the grace of God and the position in grace that results, men and women have equal standing before him.

This is what Paul means when he writes in Galatians three:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. – *Galatians 3:28*

This is all about one's standing in a grace relationship with God. None has more standing than the other. But Paul doesn't mean that there no longer exists Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female. That would make no sense at all.

2) God created man and then woman, thereby putting the woman in this relationship to man, his head. Every person has a head – even Jesus Christ. We see in the Gospels that Jesus was under his Father's authority. And yet, he was equal to God. This was precisely the reason why the Jewish leaders sought to kill him because he was making himself out to be equal with God.

The Godhead models this combination of what C.K. Barrett calls

...ontological equality (equality of essence or being) combined with functional subordination (submission within role differentiation).

Jesus, fully and equally God in essence, submits himself to the Father, his head. The principle is modeled in the human creation. Genesis one tells us that God made man in his image – male and female. In chapter two we see that God made the man and the woman, in sequence. The woman's place in creation is not the same as the man. There is a function of roles. That was Paul's point in this passage.

We are living in an age where egalitarianism is being heavily promoted. Let's define that word. Dictionary.com says that egalitarianism is "belief in the equality of all people, especially in political, social, or economic life."

No problem with that definition, but where this has been taken to the extreme is the rejection of any role differentiation. And so we see in our society an inordinately strong push to deny any differences between men and women, boys and girls.

Some want to take that verse from Galatians 3:28 ("there is neither male nor female") and use it to deny any role differences. That view is then applied to marriage, to the leadership offices in the church, and there is a denial that there should be any functional differences between male and female.

On the contrary, we, as Christians, should embrace and celebrate God's creation which includes functional roles of men and women. We – men and women – are different. God has made us different.

A little boy was walking down a dirt road after church one Sunday afternoon when he came to a crossroads where he met a little girl coming from the other direction.

'Hello,' said the little boy. 'Hi,' replied the little girl. 'Where are you going?' asked the little boy.

'I've been to church this morning and I'm on my way home,' answered the little girl.

'I'm also on my way home from church. Which church do you go to?' asked the little boy.

'I go to the Baptist church back down the road,' replied the little girl. 'What about you? '

'I go to the Methodist church back at the top of the hill,' replied the little boy. They discover that they are both going the same way so they decided that they'd walk together.

They came to a low spot in the road where spring rains had partially flooded the road, so there was no way that they could get across to the other side without getting wet.

'If I get my new Sunday dress wet, my Mom's going to skin me alive,' said the little girl. 'My Mom'll tan my hide, too, if I get my new Sunday suit wet,' replied the little boy.

'I tell you what I think I'll do,' said the little girl. 'I'm gonna pull off all my clothes and hold them over my head and wade across.'

'That's a good idea,' replied the little boy. 'I'm going to do the same thing with my suit.'

So they both undressed and waded across to the other side without getting their clothes wet. They were standing there in the sun waiting to drip dry before putting their clothes back on, when the little boy finally remarked:

'You know, I never realized before just how much difference there really is between a BAPTIST and a METHODIST!!!

We're different! But listen – the Gospel liberates. It liberates man and woman. Grace puts men and women on equal standing before God. And rather than obliterating role differences rooted in creation, this freedom enables them to function in a godly way within their God-given roles.

When we come to passages that we have difficulty accepting, that goes against the grain of our human thinking, we are faced with a question. Do I believe God? It's not just, "Do I believe in God," but "Do I believe God?"

This is where we are called to humility and submission to God as the One who has designed us, created us, saved us, and works in us. This is often in conflict with modern thought and culture.

3) The application to the 21<sup>st</sup> century church is most often not in head coverings. There are some cultures in which Christian women should be thoughtful about this application, but probably not in the average church in America.

A specific application today for women from this passage would be the appropriate dress for public worship. Paul, using the example of head coverings, is arguing for a sense of decorum, modesty, appropriateness of dress so as not to divert attention away from the worship of God.

In terms of the general principle Paul is teaching, there's another application we might draw. I think we see in our culture an attempt to diminish the image of man. We see this in most television sitcoms which basically portray men as imbeciles and idiots (not that some men don't act like idiots!). It is demeaning and diminishing of man's standing before God in his creation as a man.

Well, I told you up front this isn't an easy passage. I hope I didn't just muddle the water for you. We don't throw it out because it is difficult to understand or we don't like what Paul says. On the other hand, we must be careful not to hold to a view that Paul doesn't teach. At least I hope I got you to think this morning and wrestle with the text.