

Study 14: 1st Corinthians Chapter 11

The Head Covering

Introduction

In chapter 11 Paul deals with the issues of women's role in the church, and the proper use of the Lord's Supper, before he commences a quite lengthy discussion on Spiritual Gifts (in the next three chapters). This study will look at Paul's instructions concerning head coverings, and then in the next study we will look at the Lord's Supper.

Body of the Study

The cultural background to the problem

Paul's reaction to the head covering

Order in the church!

Action in the early church

Hair as an example

Is wearing a veil a cultural, or a doctrinal issue?

How does this relate to today's society?

Custom within the churches

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *What are the practical outworking of the Head Covering? If someone believes that they should wear a head covering, whilst others believe not, then what are the implications for the church?*
- *In what ways is our western culture different to the culture in the New Testament churches? What are some examples of those cultural differences that come out in our worship?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Think through the significance of the Lord's Supper – what does it mean? in preparation for next week.

Notes for study 14: Chapter 11:1- 16

Introduction

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I recognise that others may have different views or conclusions on this, and I respect their position.

Body of the Study

The cultural background to the problem

The culture in Corinth – a Roman colony – was more Roman than Greek. Therefore the culture in the church was more influenced by the Romans, who placed a higher emphasis on “correct” clothing than the Jews or the Greeks. The Greeks were far more pragmatic in their approach to dress codes, and many of them were perplexed as to why Roman men wore a head covering in their (pagan) worship, and they would have been observing such practices long before Paul ever arrived in Corinth. Oster¹, quotes and provides multiple references to support the use of a head covering outside of the church in the Corinthian culture.

The church in Corinth was not predominantly Jewish, so, it is most unlikely that the head covering issue in the church in Corinth was brought from the Jews, but rather from the pagan world. Some men in the assembly would have had their heads covered whilst prophesying or praying (Romans), whilst some had their heads not covered (Greeks or Jews). Likewise there would have been some women with their head covered, and some with it uncovered. This of course begs the question as to why Paul didn't sort the problem out when he was there. It is likely that either he did, and it had been re-introduced after he left, or with the predominant beginning of the church with the Jews, it wasn't a problem at the beginning. As the church grew, and more and more Romans from the city were converted, the problem exacerbated itself.

The cultural head covering in Corinth was a veil. It was not a hat that people were wearing. Paul neither says nor implies anything about a hat. The men would often wear the veil of their robe pulled up over their head, so that only their face was visible. Likewise the women would wear a veil covering their entire head except their faces.

Paul's reaction to the head covering

Paul introduces his discussion on the head covering with the words “...*Now I praise you...(and)...I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ...*” (1:11:2-3). This is in direct contrast to what he says when he introduces the discussion on the Lord's Supper “...*shall I praise you in this – I praise you not!...*” (1:11:17).

So, in Paul did not have great “issues” with the practice concerning the head covering that was being observed in Corinth – whatever that was!

¹ Oster, Richard E Jnr; “Culture or Binding Principle – A Study of Head Coverings, Hairstyles, etc” In Harding University 67th Annual Lectureship Book, October 1990, Searcy Arkansas. pp 427- 455.

Order in the church!

In this chapter (and some of the later chapters to follow), Paul discusses the issues around order (doing things in an orderly manner, as well as hierarchy) in the church. Whatever conclusion we reach on the wearing of a head covering, Paul's instruction on order cannot be ignored.

God (the Father) is the head, and Christ is subject to Him. Every man is likewise subject to Christ, and every woman (wife) is likewise subject to the man (her husband). Subjection and inferiority are not synonymous. Christ "...became obedient (to God) unto death..." (Phil 2:8) and "...therefore God has highly exalted Him..." (Phil 2:9) and He "...did not think equality with God was robbery..." (Phil 2:6). So, whilst Christ is in *subjection* to God, He is not the least bit *inferior*. This is exactly the situation with a man and a woman.

- 1 Man is the image and glory of God (vs 7a)
- 2 Woman is the glory of man (7b)
- 3 Man is not of the woman, but the woman is of the man (vs 8)
- 4 Woman was created for the man (vs 9)

The issue that Paul is identifying is that the woman is to be *in subjection* to the man in exactly the same way that Christ *is in subjection* to God. Like the relationship of Christ to God, there is no issue of *equality* between man and woman. The difference is in their *role*, not in their *value* or their relationship with God. There is no inferiority between a man and a woman, but God has given them different roles in the church.

Paul also discusses the roles of men and women in Eph 5:22-33 and 1 Tim 2:8-15. The order is set "...because man was first created, ...and the woman...deceived the man..." (1 Tim 2:13-14).

Look at the symmetry that Paul uses in the passage:

11:4	<i>Every Man</i>	Head is Christ
11:7	<i>A man</i>	Should not cover his head
11:14	<i>A man</i>	Long hair dishonours him
11:5	<i>Every woman</i>	Prays or prophesies with head uncovered dishonours her head
11:10	<i>A woman</i>	A symbol of authority on her head
11:15	<i>A woman</i>	Has long hair, it is her glory

Action in the early church

Notice that Paul is discussing a woman *praying or prophesying* (1:11:5). Paul does not say when *others* are praying or prophesying, but when THEY are praying or prophesying. In the NT church, there were some women who had miraculous gifts (Acts 21:9). Apparently, they were exercising their gifts in the assembly, and insisting on their right to over-rule the men (1:14:34).

The issue of the head covering then, was important to demonstrate the woman's subjection to a man. So, when is the head covering to be "worn" by the woman, and "not worn" by the man? Is it only when praying and prophesying, or at other times?

Hair as an example

Paul appeals to nature as an example. It is natural for a man to have short hair, and for a woman to have long hair. Women with short-back-and-sides or a man with shoulder length hair (or longer) was not the natural thing in Roman, Greek, or Jewish societies, and those that had them would be regarded with shame.

A woman's long hair has been given to her –as her shining glory – as her head covering. Paul expands on the matter of the hair. If a person's hair style would be considered shameful, then the inappropriate wearing of the head covering should be viewed in the same way that a man with long hair, or a woman with a shaved head would be regarded – as shameful. “To blur the distinctions between a man and a woman is wrong, whether the subject is hair, clothing, or even jewelry”²

What the woman has on her head is not “power” - *dynamis*, but *exousia* – “authority” However it is not “authority” *per se* that she has, but rather a *symbol of that authority* (NASB), or *sign of the authority* (NIV). So, how is that authority symbolised in today's western society?

Is wearing a veil a cultural, or a doctrinal issue?

The question is – “Is this culture binding on the church today?” All of christianity relies on culture in some way, shape, or form. The holy kisses of Romans 16 reflect the culture at the time and place. But so too does the Roman practice of crucifixion; and water baptism reflects the Jewish culture and practice of purification. The practices and commands of the NT can only be understood in the practices and culture of the society in which it exists.

However, there are some things that transcend culture – such as baptism and the significance of the crucifixion. So, how do we *determine* what is culture, and what is doctrine? The first and most obvious thing is to observe whether or not we have a direct command to do something (and in the case of an example, whether it was done in response to a command in scripture). We have a command to go into all the world and preach the gospel (Mk 16:15). In fulfilling the command, we have the example of Paul travelling by ship to Rome. So, should we all get on a ship and go to Rome? Obviously not! And if we needed to go to Rome, would Paul's example prohibit travelling by air? We can all see the principle here. We have a command, and in response to the command we need to do something. The *need* to travel was not *specified*, but was *implied* by the command to go teach. The *method* of travel was left to the individual according to the need and culture at the time.

A second principle is that of *consistency*. Is the thing under question carried out in the same manner everywhere? Whilst we see Paul travelling by ship, we also see him walking, and we see Philip travelling in a chariot (Acts 8: 31). If (for example) in *every* case of travel, it was *always* done by chariot (or ship, or walking) then we *might* be able to conclude that the *method* of travel was a matter of doctrine.

A third principle is that implementing the action must not add to or create something different than what has been authorised. Because we need to travel, and because we need a ship to travel in, does not give us authority to buy a ship building factory. It *might* (under some circumstances) give us authority to buy a boat, and certainly to purchase a passage on a commercial boat. Preaching has been authorised, but building boats goes beyond that.

So, back to the head covering question. What is the command that we have, and what was done in response to that command? Clearly, the issue is subjection that is shown by the wearer, and the head covering is the sign of that subjection / authority.

Is there the same cultural significance today in western society that there was with the head covering in the Corinthian society? The answer is *clearly not!* What has changed, is how that

² Harshbarger, Randy “Relationship of Man and Woman” Florida College Lectures, 1996, p. 175

subjection shown? The head covering was clearly an issue on the Corinthian society *outside of the church* and as such was a part of the culture. In western society, the head covering is not part of our culture, however those on society show their submission by their respectful actions, speech, and behaviour.

To be consistent, a woman in western society who wore a head covering as a sign of submission in worship, should wear the head covering at all times – as submission to husbands is not confined to worship. In fact, Muslim women generally carry out the practice, albeit not for the reasons Paul has given here.

Is Paul outlining a “dress code” here for the church? Paul’s instructions are not directed to the entire worship service, but only to some specific acts during that worship – that of praying and prophesying (1:11:4-5). So, clearly the head covering is not a dress code – but rather a matter of propriety during a specific part of the service, during which the manner of dress was not appropriate for the action being undertaken.

How does this relate to today’s society?

The feminist culture has arisen in our society over the last 50 years or so. The feminists have challenged the way society operates, and in extreme cases have “changed” the spelling of any word that contains a form of the word “men” – for example “womyn”. In another example that has become popular, the *political correct* description is *chairperson* rather than *chairman*. In fact, *chairman* comes from a derivation of the Latin word *manifold* – “to hold” – so it is “the holder of the chair”. It is true that women (in the past) have not been treated equally in society – such as the right to vote, and equal pay for equal work. But as the feminist culture and pluralist culture (the idea that there is no right and wrong, and everyone’s opinion is just as valid on everything as everyone else’s) grow in the community, it is inevitable that they will grow and invade the church. This has resulted in several circumstances of legal challenges to churches on doctrinal issues, and the recent issues of feminist issues in the Anglican church in Australia (and elsewhere).

The feminist culture does not align with Paul’s teaching on *order* and *submission*. The feminists demand not to be in subjection to anyone, when Paul clearly commands it!

Specifically on the head covering issue, the wearing of hats (by both women and men) brings with it no symbolism in western society, unlike the culture at Corinth. If we asked 1000 people walking down the street why a particular woman was wearing a hat, the comments would range from sun protection, to fashion, or “I dunno” or “who cares!”. It would be extremely doubtful than any response would relate to a cultural issue, and none would say that it was to show that she is under the authority of her husband.

To conclude the matter, in the church today in western society, we respect the *reason* behind Paul’s teaching – that of proper and appropriate practice in worship, and respect for order and submission. The custom and culture of the Corinthian church has to be recognised for what it is.

Custom within the churches

Paul actually describes custom (culture if you like) within the churches in reference to this issue (1:11:16). Some translations have “*We have no OTHER custom*” whilst others have “*We have no SUCH custom*”. The general translation is “no such custom”. Harshbarger says:

“There is no justification for the word “other.” Though one may appear to be contentious, Paul was denying any such attitude of those who exhorted the Corinthians to wear the veil in view of the prevailing custom there. However, “we” (probably the apostles) and the “churches of God” (in other places) “have no such custom”.³

³ Harshbarger, Ibid p 175-176
Study of Corinthians by Graeme Offer