



THE NEXT THREE TOPICS Paul addresses all deal with behavior in worship.

They include what men and women should or should not wear on their heads (11:2–16), proper conduct during the Lord’s Supper (11:17–34), and the use and abuse of spiritual gifts (chaps. 12–14). Only the last of these is introduced with the “now about” phrase that suggests a direct reply to an item in the letter from Corinth. Yet 11:2 seems abrupt and awkwardly placed unless it reflects Paul’s response to some affirmation by the Corinthians that they were “remembering [Paul] in everything and holding to [his] teachings” (literally, “traditions”). It may well be that they went on to specify faithfulness to his teaching on male and female equality (cf. Gal. 3:28) and to the tradition of regularly practicing the Lord’s Supper (cf. v. 23).¹ Whether or not these two issues had been specified, Paul has information (if not at least partly from their letter, then clearly from other personal reports—v. 18) that suggests all is not well.

In the case of head coverings, Paul continues his “yes, but” logic. Yes, he praises them for their faithfulness to his teaching—probably about freedom (v. 2), but they have carried things too far (“now” in v. 3 should probably be translated “but”). Yes, it is true that men and women are equal in Christ before God, but that does not mean that all differences between the sexes may be blurred.

The events that lie behind verses 3–16 seem to proceed as follows. Because of their new found freedom in Christ, women in the Corinthian church were praying and prophesying (v. 5a). Christian tradition from Pentecost on had approved of such practice (Acts 2:18), and it readily fit Paul’s own emphasis on freedom. But these women were not merely speaking in worship but doing it in a way that unnecessarily flaunted social convention and the order of creation. So Paul has to encourage them to exercise restraint. As in chapters 8–10, knowledge must be tempered with love.²

One of the keys to understanding verses 3–10 is to recognize Paul’s play on the word “head.” The main point of this paragraph is the claim that what one does or doesn’t put on one’s physical head either honors or dishonors one’s spiritual head. Verse 3 establishes three such relationships of spiritual headship, but what the term for head (Gk. *kephale*) means here is hotly debated. The word was not often used figuratively (i.e., to refer to something other than a part of one’s anatomy); when it was it seems that its two main meanings were either “source” or “authority.”³ Paul appears to use both meanings elsewhere (e.g., Eph. 4:15 more readily yields “source”; Eph. 1:22, “authority”), so a decision will ultimately depend on the immediate context. But even here Paul sends mixed signals, supplying an argument from the origin of men and women in verses 8–9, 12 but speaking explicitly of authority (Gk. *exousia*) in verse 10. The other passage in which Paul calls a man “head” over a woman refers as well to wives’ subordination to their husbands (Eph. 5:22–24), so “authority” seems somewhat more likely here too.

The order of the three parts of verse 3 also proves significant. Some commentators stress that the sequence does not set up a chain of command, as if Paul had written, “The head of the woman is man, the head of every man is Christ, and the head of Christ is God.” On the other hand, since the problem in Corinth involved men and women (but not Christ) dishonoring their heads, it is natural that he should refer to the heads of the man and of the woman first. The rationale for placing Christ’s relationship to God last is most likely to draw attention to it as an analogy for the relationship between men, women, and their heads (the same sequence in v. 12).

There are at least three additional problems with an interpretation that denies any sense of “authority” to the word “head” in verse 3. First, if “head” is taken merely as “source,” it would require interpreting “the head of Christ is God” as a reference to the incarnation, in order to avoid the ancient Arian heresy of claiming that God created Christ. But nothing else in the passage deals with Jesus coming to earth from heaven, while Paul’s theological arguments in both verses 8–9 and 10–11 explicitly appeal to the way God fashioned things at the time of creation. Second, the vast majority of all church history has understood “head” as “authority.” Traditional consensus, of course, is not inspired, but weighty arguments are needed to overthrow it. Third, up until the last few years, almost everybody who argued for “source” still did so within a hierarchical framework. That is to say, even if Paul is talking only about origins in verse 3, he does so to set up his subsequent commands about honoring those in authority over us.⁴ Fortunately, however, the overall thrust of this passage remains clear even if one cannot agree on the precise meaning of “head.”

Another disputed issue in verses 3–10 involves the translation of the words the NIV consistently renders as “man” (*aner*) and “woman” (*gune*). In every other place in Paul where they are paired, with the possible exception of 1 Timothy 2:8–15, they refer to husband and wife. It is much harder to understand how Paul could have claimed that every man is an authority over every woman and much easier to interpret the passage if husbands and wives are meant throughout (e.g., v. 5). References to the creation of man and woman (vv. 8–9) have understandably given rise to the former translation, but Adam and Eve were not only the prototypical male and female but also the first “married” couple. Given that Paul addresses the problems of singleness and widowhood in chapter 7, we may not deduce that every woman in the Corinthian church, even in a patriarchal society, necessarily had one specific male authority living—that is, a husband or father. The NRSV, therefore, may well be justified in translating the middle clause of verse 3 as “The husband is the head of his wife.”

Verses 4–5a proceed with Paul’s play on words. In each verse, the first use of “head” refers to the physical anatomy; the second to the spiritual authority or originator (depending on how one interprets *kephale*). The reference to praying and prophesying shows that the context is public worship; the latter in particular required an audience to be effective! Chapters 12–14 will explain Paul’s understanding of prophecy. For now it must suffice to define it broadly as the proclamation of a message given by God to a Christian speaker for the benefit of a particular congregation. It may include both spontaneous utterances and carefully thought-out communication, so long as the prophet is convinced that God has led him or her to preach a certain message (cf. below, pp. 244–45).

“With his head covered” in verse 4 reads literally, “having down from the head.” As the NIV footnote makes plain,⁵ this might refer to long hair rather than to some external covering like a veil or shawl. In verses 14–15 Paul is definitely talking about relative lengths of hair for men and women, so it is somewhat more natural to assume that he has been talking about hairstyles all along. Long hair on Greek men might well have led to suspicions of homosexual behavior.⁶ If an external covering is meant, then Paul is probably objecting to a practice which resembled that of Roman priests pulling their togas up over their heads while offering sacrifice or performing religious rituals.⁷ Still another possibility is that long hair on men made their appearance resemble the elaborate hairdos of the sophists.⁸

Wives, however, should keep their heads covered (v. 5a). Again, the covering could refer to long hair. It could be that Paul wants them to keep it “done up,” as was the custom among married women, rather than loose and flowing—a sign in some circles of being unmarried or, worse still, of suspected adultery (among Jews) or pagan, prophetic frenzy (among Greeks). Or it could be that they are simply wearing their hair too short, perilously close 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. Alternately, if an external head covering is meant, Paul probably wants married women to wear a shawl over their hair

and shoulders, as many Greek women still did in public, and not to resemble those who discarded their hair coverings during pagan worship in order to demonstrate their temporary transcendence of human sexuality.⁹

In verses 5b–6, Paul remarks ironically that if women are going to send ambiguous signals about their sexuality or religious commitments through inappropriate hairstyles or lack of headdress, then they might as well go all the way and become bald (or discard all head coverings) and unequivocally send the wrong signals! Verses 7–10, however, state Paul’s true preference—that the Corinthian husbands and their wives revert back to the culturally appropriate signs of marital fidelity and worship of the one true God. Verse 7 makes this point by referring to the husbands as the “glory and image of God” and the wives as the “glory of their husbands.” In verses 14–15 “glory” is the opposite of “disgrace,” so in both places it probably carries the sense of “honor.” For a Christian man to appear gay or pagan dishonors God; for a woman to appear lesbian or unfaithful dishonors her husband. Obviously husbands also dishonor their wives and wives dishonor God when they act in these inappropriate ways, but if an authority structure is implicit in this passage, Paul’s less inclusive wording becomes understandable. One should be particularly concerned not to dishonor one’s immediate spiritual head.

Verses 8–9 ground the commands of verses 4–7 in a two-fold argument from creation:¹⁰ (1) Adam was created first and then Eve (v. 8); (2) woman was created to be a helper suitable for man (Gen. 2:18) and not the reverse (v. 9). Verse 10 brings the first part of Paul’s argument to a climax, but with a notoriously obscure statement. “For this reason” suggests that this sentence is giving a further rationale for women keeping their heads covered (either with lots of hair or with a shawl). The NIV therefore translates *exousia echein epi* (literally, “have authority on”) as “have a *sign* of authority on.” But there is no word for “sign” in the Greek, and “to have authority” most naturally means something the woman would actively exercise. So a popular recent view has been that the woman’s head covering indicates *her* authority to pray and prophesy.¹¹ Yet every other use of this three-word construction in the New Testament means “to have authority (or control) *over*” (Matt. 9:6 [par. Mark 2:10; Luke 5:24]; Rev. 11:6; 14:18; 16:9; 20:6; and cf. the similar constructions with *epano* for *epi* in Luke 19:17, and with *peri* for *epi* in 1 Cor. 7:37). This suggests a translation more along the lines of “For this reason ... a wife should exercise control over her head [i.e., keep the appropriate covering on it].”¹²

“Because of the angels” proves equally perplexing. The suggestions that these are fallen angels who might be sexually seduced or human messengers or church leaders go against the consistent meaning of *angeloi* used without qualification elsewhere in the New Testament. It is better to see them as the angels who remain God’s servants, watching over creation and protecting the worship of his people. They in particular would want to see services proceed with appropriate dignity and decorum.¹³

Verses 11–12 introduce an important qualification into Paul’s discussion. Beginning with a strong contrast (*plen*—“however”), Paul reminds the Corinthians that as Christians, notwithstanding creation, husbands and wives (or perhaps men and women more generally) are fundamentally interdependent. The order of creation is reversed in subsequent procreation, and whatever hierarchies remain are significantly tempered by the fact that God is the origin of everything that belongs to redemption. He is therefore our ultimate and most important authority.

Verses 13–16 return to the specific problem of head coverings, this time explicitly referring to long hair on men and women, with three further arguments. After appealing to the Corinthians to conclude that what Paul is saying is true (“Judge for yourselves”—v. 13a; cf. 10:15), he argues further from propriety (v. 13b), nature (vv. 14–15), and the widespread first-century custom (NIV “practice”) of all believers (v. 16).¹⁴ The first and third of these clearly refer to the “status quo” in Paul’s day. “Nature” sounds like an appeal to the way God created things, but Paul the Jew would have known of the Nazirites whom God blessed precisely because they did not cut their hair (of whom Samson was the most famous example; Judg. 13:5). In the Greek world, the Spartan men were known for their shoulder-

length hair. But it was true, then as now, that most cultures maintained a relative difference in hair length between men and women. So “nature” is probably best understood here as that which is “almost instinctive because of long habit,” a “long-established custom.”¹⁵

Verse 15b also supports the idea that hair length or style has been the issue throughout verses 2–16. “As a covering” might more literally be rendered “instead of a wrap-around garment.” That is, rather than wearing the customary hair shawl as Greek women did, long hair, perhaps done up in a bun, will suffice for Christian women. On the other hand, if an external garment is in view in verses 3–10, then Paul will be drawing an analogy here. Just as “nature” teaches that women should wear long hair as a head covering, so it is appropriate for women to further cover their heads according to the established custom of the day. But the transition is abrupt, and it would seem slightly better to follow the NIV footnote for verses 4–7 and see hair as the primary topic of this entire section. Grammatically, the least probable portions of this alternate rendering are the phrases, “let her be for now with short hair” and “she should grow it again” in verse 6. But the translation problems are solved if we adopt the interpretation that women were not keeping their hair “done up” properly. Then this verse would convey the sense, “If a woman will not do her hair properly, she might as well cut it off. But if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven as men are, she should do her hair in a womanly fashion.” Verse 15 might then be translated, “For long hair is given her so that she may wind it around her head.”¹⁶