1 Corinthians 11:2-16: An Exegetical Summary

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Introduction

In the days of Paul’s ministry to the Corinthians, a woman’s head cover played a far more substantial role than it does today in our American culture. In the Greco-Roman culture of Corinth, a woman wearing a head cover in public indicated she was chaste and modest, which in turn would bring honor to her husband and father. In contrast, an uncovered head or shaved head would indicate quite the opposite and could possibly link a woman to the prostitution that took place at the Temple of Aphrodite.¹

While some maintain that throughout Paul’s letter to the Corinthians and in particular, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, he is teaching an anti-feminist doctrine for women in the church. Nothing could be further from the truth. When properly interpreted against the backdrop of the culture of that time, one can identify more clearly Paul’s issues. Paul took issue with the message that was being portrayed by head coverings in public rather than who was inferior to whom. He is not teaching a woman is inferior to a man but rather that “People can be equal in essence and yet have different functions.”² His focus was then that feminine propriety should be maintained in order to bring honor to these functioning roles while protecting the image of the church.

Context

The Corinth in which Paul had corresponded with was to put it in Garland’s words, “geographically in Greece but culturally in Rome.”³ The Greek city was destroyed and burned for opposing Rome in 146 BC by the Roman general Mummius. It was not until 44 BC some 100 years later; Julius Caesar refounded Corinth as a Roman colony. This refound colony was populated with war veterans, slaves, and debtors which was probably one thing that contributed to the relentless strive for status in Corinth.⁴

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¹ David E. Garland, 1 Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Baker Academia, 2003), 509-510.
³ David E. Garland, 1 Corinthians, 3.
⁴ Content adapted from Garland, 1 Corinthians and class notes from NT 6207 – 1 Corinthians, William Wilson Luther Rice Seminary, 2014.
The geographical location of Corinth played a significant role in the contributing factors of its social and economic culture. Corinth was a major sea port that controlled trade to and from Rome. Only a small isthmus (which could be passed over) separated the eastern Aegean Sea from the trade routes to Rome. “Thus Corinth became a city of wealth and pleasure. People went there with money to spend and to indulge themselves in varied pleasures.”

Corinth was a syncretic city influenced heavily by the Greco-Roman culture. It adopted a Greco-Roman view of wisdom, which was a worldly wisdom based on honor and status. Only the wealthy and socially elites were to be considered wise. It was a place obsessed with status, power, prestige, and popularity. For the Corinthian, this was the ultimate goal to be achieved at all cost. Sophistic rhetoric became a common tool used in Corinth to achieve these things. Out of this struggle for status developed a sort of hierarchy that could be compared to a moderate caste system. This bred an egocentric individuality, something completely foreign to the unity and equality in the church that Paul was preaching.

1 Corinthians is an epistle written by the Apostle Paul from Ephesus A.D. 54/55 to the church in which he founded on his second missionary journey at Corinth (Acts 18) in A.D. 51. 1 Corinthians is, in fact, not the first letter Paul has written to the Corinthians; the first letter is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9 and has presumably been lost. The letter entitled 1 Corinthians in our Bible is a combination of replies from Paul in order to correct the Corinthians on their misunderstanding of his first letter (5:10-11). 1 Corinthians is then a compilation of responses to a letter that the Corinthians had sent to Paul (7:1), as well as a response to oral reports that came to him from Chloe’s people (1:11). Paul was alternating between responding to the oral reports that came from Chloe’s people and answering questions from the previous letter the Corinthians had sent him. The structure of the letter develops as:

- Response to oral reports from Chloe’s people Ch. 1-6
- Response to Corinthian letter Ch. 7-10
- Response to oral reports from Chloe’s people Ch. 11
- Response to Corinthian letter Ch. 12-14
- Response to oral reports from Chloe’s people Ch. 15
- Response to Corinthian letter Ch. 16

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6 Content adapted from Garland, *1 Corinthians and class notes from NT 6207 – 1 Corinthians*, William Wilson Luther Rice Seminary, 2014.
8 Structure adapted from Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 21.
Exegetical Summary

Praise to the Corinthians for the Ordinances they were Keeping

1 Corinthians 11:2 - Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.

Verse 11.1 is the final exhortation of Paul’s teaching on food sacrificed to idols and it belongs with the thoughts of chapter 10. Thus the “Now” (de) in 11:2 indicates a transition to a new subject in which Paul has turned to. He has left the subject of food sacrificed to idols which consisted of chapters 8:1-11:1 and has now (de) turned to the subject of headdress in public worship, which consists of chapters 11:2-16. 

Paul’s “praise” for them is to best be understood as a legitimate praise for keeping the “ordinances” (paradosis, traditions) he had “delivered” (paradidomi, handed down) to them. He was not using the praise as a rhetorical feature merely to soften them up for the “I praise you not” he gave them on their application of the Lords Supper in 11:17 which in turn begins the next topic in the chapter (11:17-34). The Corinthians (as bad as they were) had obviously not strayed from all of Paul’s teachings and were worthy of some praise.

The Principle of Headship

1 Corinthians 11:3 - But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.

The “But” (de) here in verse 3 points back to verse 2, indicating a contrast between ways in which the Corinthian’s were keeping the “ordinances” and ways in which they were not. “I would have” (thelo) means to have a desire, mainly Paul had a desire to show the Corinthians where the contrast lies in keeping the ordinances. What teachings the Corinthians are failing to grasp, Paul has delivered to them in basic principle form:

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9 Based on Garland’s outline, Garland 1 Corinthians, vii-viii.
14 Garland, 1 Corinthians, 513.
1. “the head of every man is Christ”
2. “the head of the woman is the man”
3. “the head of Christ is God”

This theological principle the Corinthians are failing to grasp demonstrates that there is an orderly structure and a functional subordination to be maintained. Hodge, however, seemingly maintains that Paul’s premise reflects a strictly subordinate nature, teaching the woman is subordinate to the man. Garland offers a better explanation in that he maintains:

[Paul] establishes the premise that everyone has a head so that he can set up his argument that what individuals do to their physical head in worship reflects negatively or positively on their metaphorical head. His purpose is not to write a theology of gender but to correct an unbefitting practice in worship that will tarnish the church’s reputation.15

He goes on to say:

Paul’s primary intent, then, is not to assert the supremacy of man and the subordination 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’16

So here Paul has used “head” (kephale) in this verse to represent one who is preeminent. This is made obviously clear by the succeeding versus and the description given, “dishonoureth” (11:4, 5) “shame” (11:6) and “glory” (11:7) all having the antecedent of what one does with his or her head in public worship.

The Dishonoring of a Man’s Head

1 Corinthians 11:4 - Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head.

Paul has used “head” (kephale) literally as well as metaphorically in this verse. If a man covers his literal physical “head” while praying he “dishonoureth” (kataischyno, shame) his metaphorical “head” Christ. Paul has built on his premise from 11:3 in order to deal with headdress in public worship.17

15 Garland, 1 Corinthians, 513-514.
16 Garland, 1 Corinthians, with (Bloomberg 1994:208) in quotations, 516.
17 For a complete treatment of the word Kephale see Grudem in Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood, Appendix 1.
The Dishonoring of a Woman’s Head

1 Corinthians 11:5 - But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.

The “But” (de) here in verse 5 again indicates a contrast, a contrast between a covered man’s head and an uncovered woman’s head. As in verse 11:4 Paul uses “head” (kephale) literally as well as metaphorically, this time speaking of the woman. When a woman “prayeth or prophesieth” (in public worship) with her literal physical “head” uncovered she “dishonoureth” her metaphorical head the man. “For” (gar, because), it is the same as having her head “shaven”. In the Greco-Roman culture, a shaved head was shameful.18

The Shame of a Woman’s Uncovered Head

1 Corinthians 11:6 - For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.

Paul went on to explain the why of verse 5. “For” (gar, because) a women’s uncovered head in public worship is the same as a woman having a shaved head. The analogy follows that “if” (representing a conditional inference) it is shameful to be both shaven or uncovered the opposite would be to cover her head. Garland points out that a woman’s hair in 11:14-15 and in this passage is only used to magnify his argument about head coverings and should not be considered the central issue. He sees the syllogism as such:

- An uncovered head for a woman is the same as being shorn
- It is shameful for a woman to be shorn.
- Therefore, she should cover her head.19

The Glory of a Man and the Glory of a Woman

1 Corinthians 11:7- For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.

Recognizing the motif in 11:4-6 is that man and woman both should avoid bringing shame on their respected metaphorical heads, verse 7 then gives the explanation of why.20

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18 Hodge, An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, 209.
19 Garland, 1 Corinthians, 519.
20 Ibid, 508.
• Verse 4 - man’s covered head = dishonor and shame to his head Christ
• Verse 7 – why? because “he is the image and glory of God”
• Verse 5-6 – woman’s uncovered head = dishonor (v.5) and shame (v.6)
• Verse 7- why? because “Woman is the glory of the man”

The glory (doxa) becomes the focus in verse 7 from which Paul built his case for the following versus (8-9), explaining why “woman is the glory of man”\(^\text{21}\)

### The Basis for Man and Woman’s Glory

1 Corinthians 11:8, 9 - For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.

Woman is the glory of man based on the created order of Gen 2:18-23 because man did not come from woman (man was created first), but the woman came from the man (Adams rib v.8). The created order, likewise, reveals that woman was created for man (v.9). On these two premises, Paul has rested his case that “woman is the glory of man.” (11:7)\(^\text{22}\)

### A Woman Should Cover Her Head During Public Worship

1 Corinthians 11:10 - For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.

“For this cause” (dia touto, because of this) is also built from and refers back to Paul’s argument in 11:8-9 and the conclusion of verse 7. Because woman is the glory of man she ought to have “power” (exousian, authority) over her “head” (kephales, physical literal head). Therefore, she must exercise self-control and wear a head cover while praying or prophesying in public to symbolize feminine propriety.\(^\text{23}\) “because of the angels” is best understood as Hodge has said:

> The inference is that the woman ought to wear the ordinary symbol of the authority of her husband. As it was proper in its self and demanded by the common sense of propriety that the woman should be veiled [head covered], it was especially proper in the worshipping assemblies, for there they were in the presence not merely of men but of angels. It was, therefore, not only out of deference to public opinion but out of


\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 525.
reverence to those higher intelligences that the woman should conform to all the rules of decorum.  

The Interdependence of a Man and a Woman

1 Corinthians 11:11, 12 - Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.

“Without” (choris, independently of) portraits a mutual dependence on each other. “Woman is of the man” meaning that the first woman came from man (cf. 11:8) however, every man since Adam, has come from the woman, therefore, one is not inferior to the other nor does one possess more value than the other. “In the Lord” refers to the mutual independence being by divine design.

Judging For Yourself

1 Corinthians 11:13 - Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?

While adding balance to his argument with versus 11 and 12, Paul has returned to the issue of head dress for women. Verse 13 is a rhetorical question in which the answer Paul expected was no. “Comely” (prepo, fitting, suitable, or proper), would render the question, is it suitable or proper for a woman to pray with her head “uncovered”? The Corinthians should have been able to judge for themselves without Paul’s instruction, and he gives a reason why in the next two verses.

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24 Charles Hodge, _1 Corinthians, Crossway Classic Commentaries_ (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1995), 192
27 Hodge, _An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians_, 211.
Let the Culture Decide

1 Corinthians 11:14, 15 - Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her cover.

Paul here appealed to “nature” (physis) for a final illustration of proper head cover. It makes more sense, by nature Paul meant; what is appropriate in their culture rather than the law of creation and natural order. The question he has asked; if a man has long hair is it a shame to him, required a positive response in their culture, however, in different cultures it would require a different response. Moreover, a male’s hair grows the same way as females do, nature does not automatically prevent a male's hair from growing long. It does not reach a predetermined length and then stop growing naturally. Therefore, he must have used “nature” (physis) to mean what a given society thinks and understands to be natural. This interpretation in no way undermines what God has made obvious in nature, such as male and female are different, and they serve different functions that are not to be compromised.

The focus of Paul in this text was not hair length. Hair length is only being used as an analogy of proper social decorum in their time to be compared with head cover of a woman. In other words, Paul has implied that, if the Corinthians can see it was shameful for a man to have long hair but honorable for a woman, then they very well should have been able to see that it is honorable for a woman to cover her head while praying or prophesying in public and shameful when she doesn’t. These were the ordinances the Corinthians were failing to grasp.

Feminine Propriety is an Unequivocal Teaching for the Church

1 Corinthians 11:16 - But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

“But” (de) is a contrast. By this “But,” Paul has said if anyone wants to be “contentious” (philoneikos, quarrelsome) about what he has said in the previous versus, (mainly that a woman should cover her head while praying or prophesying in public because in their present culture her uncovered physical head brings shame to her metaphorical head, which would be her husband or father), then the only thing further he had to say is that, we (the apostles) have no other customs nor do any of the other churches of God. “But if any man seem” (de ei tic doken) literally, if any seem quarrelsome, raises the question, who would be arguing against

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30 Garland, 1 Corinthians, 530-531.
31 Ibid, 531.
32 Hodge, An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, 214.
this and why? It would be quite possible that the women in the church had become relaxed with this custom because the church was meeting in homes. The home became a public place of worship when the church met in their respected homes. Not realizing the home at that point became the *ekklesia*, offers a plausible reason for uncovered heads as well as a possible argument or two.\(^3\)

**Theological Interpretation and Application**

In this text, Paul made clear that men and women are ontologically equal by referring back to the created order (11:8-9). He maintained that one is not inferior to the other, but they are independent and co-equal with one another (11:11-12).\(^4\) Just as there is a Trinitarian order of headship that exists, not as subordinate or inferior to each other in value, but as co-equal in being (11:3), there also exist this same relationship between man and woman. Women are subordinate to men only in a functioning role just as Christ is subordinate to God only in His functioning role. The issue of feminine propriety Paul was concerned with in this text is equally applicable today. He was concerned with the message women were sending in the Greco-Roman culture by not covering their heads during public worship. Today in our culture head cover does not carry with it the same implications that it did at Corinth in Paul’s time. However, a woman today should maintain feminine propriety within our social constructs in a way as to not bring shame in any way to her head, which is the man. A woman’s dress as well as her attitude should reflect the functioning role she has been given by God to man (Gen 2:18).

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\(^3\) Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 507.

\(^4\) Ibid, 523.
Selected Bibliography


1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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Below is a chart highlighting the key words and concepts in the text. The highlighting makes it easier to see the big picture. The reader can lay the last two pages side by side and use them as a tool to better grasp the point the author (Paul by way of Inspiration) was making. His logical argument can be seen by comparing the highlights, noting the comparisons and contrast.

11:1 Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.

2 Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.

3 But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.

4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head.

5 But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.

6 For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.

7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.

8 For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man.

9 Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.

10 For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.

11 Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.

12 For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.

13 Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?

14 Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?

15 But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.

16 But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

17 Now I declare unto you, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse.
The key to the interpretation of this unit is to first find where it starts and where it ends. As can be seen the section does not end where the chapters have been divided in our English Bibles. The section begins not at verse one but rather at verse two. The "Now" begins this section on headdress just as the "Now" in verse 17 starts the next section on the Lord’s Supper.

Paul offered praise starting the section on headdress by saying, "I praise you." Paul offered no praise, "I praise you not," for the way the Corinthians were administrating the Lord’s Supper Chapter 11:17-34.

A very important word throughout this text is head. The way in which Paul used this word was both literal and metaphorical. The reader must let the context determine which one was being used.

**Head** is used in a metaphorical sense. The head is representing preeminence in these verses:

- the **head** of every man is Christ (3)
- the **head** of the woman is the man (3)
- the **head** of Christ is God (3)
- dishonoureth his **head** (4)
- dishonoureth her **head** (5)

**Head** is used in a literal sense, in these verses it means the physical body part:

- his **head** covered (4)
- her **head** uncovered (5)
- cover his **head** (7)
- on her **head** (10)

There is a contrast throughout the text that Paul has made between:

- **glory** and **shame**
- covered and uncovered.

The goal is not to bring **shame** but rather **glory** to your **head** (the metaphorical one).

Paul used the created order of man and woman (8, 9) as the supporting premise for what a man ought not to do (7) and what a woman ought to do (10).

Paul demonstrated the ontological equality of the man and women in order to show that the woman is not inferior to the man.

- neither is the man without the woman
- neither the woman without the man
- For as the woman **is**
- even so **is** the man

The Corinthians should be able to judge the issue of headdress on their own, if they are able to judge the difference between long hair and short hair.

- if a man have long hair **=** shame
- if a woman have long hair **=** glory