

An Analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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STRUCTURE

A. Apostolic Tradition

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

B. Argument for the Head Covering From Doctrine – Display in the Assembly

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

C. Argument for the Head Covering From Creation – Display in the Spiritual World

C.1 – God's Glory Displayed in the Assembly

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.

C.2 – Headship Proven by the Origin of the Woman, as From Man

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

C.3 – Headship Proven by Purpose of the Woman, as For Man

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

C.4 – Angelic Observation – A Core Motivating Factor

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

C.3' – Headship Balanced by Mutual Need for Each Other

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

C.2' – Headship Balanced by Mutual Origin

For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman;

C.1' – God's Power Displayed in Creation

but all things of God.

B'. Argument for the Head Covering From Nature – Display in the Physical World

Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered? 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 for a covering.

A'. Apostolic Tradition

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

EXPLANATORY COMMENTARY

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

This tells us that Paul is not simply introducing a Christian Liberty issue, but is changing gears from chapter 10 to discuss assembly doctrine that will be manifest in the official, public activities of the assembly. “Traditions” in this case is a good term, unlike Pharisaical traditions. Apostolic tradition forms our doctrine today.

Structurally, this verse corresponds to verse 16.

Verse 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.*

Head coverings begin with a context and a basis: the existence of God-ordained Headship. This theology is given in full reliance on verse 2, that the Corinthians were faithful with apostolic tradition and needed to continue with that faithfulness in terms of head coverings.

Just as Christ is not inferior in His essence to God, so is the woman not inferior as a human because of Headship. Egalitarianism has no foundation unless it starts on a false presupposition, that role implies inferiority.

Verses 4-5: *Every man praying or prophesying, having [anything] on his head, dishonours his head. But every woman that prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven.*

“Praying or prophesying” is a synecdoche – a representative part that stands for the whole – of a public assembly meeting and participation in it. Thus, this does not contradict 1 Timothy 2 or 1 Corinthians 14.

The first “head” in each verse is physical – that which is covered or uncovered. The second “head” in each verse is spiritual – that which is honored or dishonored.

Verses 5-6: *But every woman that prays or*

prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. 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.

In other words, there is no less disgrace in being uncovered in the assembly as there is in being without the woman's natural head covering, the hair, in nature.

The shame associated with being shaven is in the context not because of a temple prostitute, but rather because it has taken the woman's glory from her (see v 15).

Verse 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.*

This brings to us the symbolism of the head covering and why it matters: it is to fully display the glory of God in His assembly, as well as to conceal the glory of man. This is not only about roles in the assembly, but who receives the glory – will it be God or man?

Verses 8-12:

Note the structure of this middle section:

- A. (8) Origin of Genders
 - B. (9) Complementarian Genders
 - C. Sign of Authority for Angels
- B'. (11) Complementarian Genders
- A'. (12) Origin of Genders

Verses 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.*

Going back to the order of creation for principles of Headship, because God was not arbitrary in His order:

1. Significance in that woman was taken from man's side, not vice versa.
2. Significance in that woman was created on account of man, not vice versa.

Verse 10: *For this cause ought the woman to*

have authority on her head because of the angels.

We must interpret this verse in light of the creatorial emphasis of verses 8-12. So then, the angels need to be understood in light of a few things:

1. They rejoiced when the earth's foundation was laid; they also saw God's perfect creation fall under a curse. Thus, they are deeply interested in the restoration of God's creatorial order, how he intended it.
2. Angels delight in looking into spiritual matters (1 Pet. 1:12). Thus, display of the doctrine of Headship would teach and remind them of truth which they delight in.
3. Angels would see the glory of God on display through head coverings (and the lack thereof on the man's head). Through this, there would be greater opportunity to worship and fear.
4. Angels are not given in marriage; thus, they cannot experimentally comprehend Headship as we do. The head covering, then, teaches them what they have no experience in.

Verses 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.*

These verses correspond respectively to verses 9 and 8 respectively (see note on verses 8-12), and they serve to balance the truth in those verses to prevent misunderstanding:

1. Though woman was made on account of the man, in the Lord neither man nor woman can be independent of each other, especially in the assembly.
2. Though woman was created from the man in creation, man is also dependent upon a woman to birth him.

Verses 13-15:

In addition to creatorial order, the Spirit brings in natural order. Creation set the principle of roles; nature exhibits the reality of roles.

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

Here Paul gives an appeal to rational discernment concerning the public head covering before borrowing proof from nature and the natural covering found therein: long hair. This keeps us on track as to the development of thought in verses 2-16.

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

This is not a cultural norm, but a natural norm that Biblically must pervade all cultures. "Does not nature itself teach you" implies the absolute clarity of Paul's point and the willful ignorance that must mark a man who rejects God-ordained order. God has established that man's hair be short; no apology is given for calling long hair on a man shameful. What constitutes long hair for a man? That which can be confused with a woman's hair, that which is free and able to flow. Man should *significantly* and *conservatively* stay away from such lengths. A biblically informed conscience will not try to stretch the limits.

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

What is a man's shame is a woman's glory, connoting logically a complementarian model of man and woman. Thus, Headship is proven as a principle in nature. *Komaō* is the Greek word used for both mentions of hair in this verse. The word denotes letting the hair grow and wearing it long. Thus it is not just hair in general that is given to a woman for a covering, but long hair. This covering is not the covering of the assembly, but of nature; because God gave her long hair, this prevents her from having to hide her shame by a covering.

Scripture associates a woman's hair with length, and four principles should be taken into account when discussing how long is long enough. (Now, to be clear, we are not advocating complete abstinence from even slight trimming; obviously, trimming off dead

ends keeps the hair healthier, which would be in keeping with treating the woman's hair as her glory.)

1. Long hair is natural, not cultural; thus cultural norms should not come into the question for the believer, but rather what God gave each woman for hair.
2. No length is given, implying it is not a question of length *per se*, but about being a steward with the amount of hair God has given each particular woman. Thus “changing things up” with the hair and significantly altering its regular length isn't within Scriptural parameters, because it isn't about style but stewardship and glory in its length.
3. Revelation 9 speaks of “hair as the hair of women.” This is obviously hair known for its length and ability to flow freely. What comes to mind isn't just hair that is slightly longer than a man's. This is what nature includes: what logically comes to mind when “woman-like” hair is mentioned.
4. In Luke 7, Mary's hair was long enough

to wipe the Saviour's feet with. Taking an application from this, could we not say that it can be an act of worship for a female to maintain the length God has given her for her glory?

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

Relating back to verse 13, Paul says that neither the apostles nor the assemblies of God had a such a custom for a woman to pray to God uncovered. In other words, if a man were to be contentious about these teachings – trying to manipulate Headship boundaries or perhaps abuse them – Paul had both the authority and majority on his side. Thus we see that the head covering was practiced in all assemblies in the first century. (Others say that “custom” refers to the contention, thus giving the meaning “our custom is not to be contentious about doctrine.” It is truth, and we must accept it. Either interpretation blows the “cultural head covering” theory out of the water.)

Verses in 1 Corinthians 11 That Make it Impossible for the Head Covering to be Merely Cultural

- Verse 2. Paul clearly sets the tone for chapter 11 as being one, not of cultural conformity, but of Scriptural obedience. If chapter 11 is cultural, surely all of 1 Corinthians must be cultural, because if we can't trust a clear verse that praises obedience to apostolic doctrine, we can't trust anything as being truly for us today in any of 1 Corinthians, or any of Paul's writings for that matter.
- Verse 3. The head covering is based by the Spirit Himself, not on culture, but on theology. Is it cultural that the Head of Christ is God?
- Verse 7. The head covering is a means to display God's glory and conceal man's glory. This is not cultural, but in keeping with the purpose of a local assembly. Surely the purpose of a local assembly's existence has not changed from culture to culture. That is to deny the sufficiency of Scripture.
- Verse 10. Angels really don't care about culture. There must be a higher meaning in this that transcends fading trends of ethnic majorities.
- Verses 14-15. Paul's appeal is to nature, not culture. There is a world of difference between the two. If Paul appealed to culture, it would be man-made order that would be at stake. But since he brought in nature, it is God-ordained order and principles that are at stake. God's principles are timeless; thus the reason behind the head covering is timeless; thus the use of the head covering is timeless.
- Verse 16. It was not a custom for any assembly in the first century for women to pray to God uncovered. Thus, it was not about Corinth alone, but doctrine for every assembly.