

The Imperfect Church – 20  
The Submissive Church  
1 Corinthians 11:2-16

### Introduction

The Bible is a peculiar book. It contains some of the most well-known, most helpful, most inspiring words in all the world.

Psalm 23:1 – <sup>1</sup>The Lord is my shepherd;  
I have all that I need.

John 3:16 – <sup>16</sup>“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Matthew 6:9b-13 - Our Father in heaven,  
may your name be kept holy.  
<sup>10</sup> May your Kingdom come soon.  
May your will be done on earth,  
as it is in heaven.  
<sup>11</sup> Give us today the food we need,  
<sup>12</sup> and forgive us our sins,  
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.  
<sup>13</sup> And don't let us yield to temptation,  
but rescue us from the evil one.

John 16:33 - <sup>33</sup>I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”

Revelation 21:4 - <sup>4</sup>He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”

The Bible can comfort us with a word, convict us with a sentence, and calm us with a verse. Yet at the same time, the Bible can confuse us in a second. One of the principles you hear me stress when we open the Bible together is that we must be mindful of context. Usually I am referring to the immediate context to ensure we have the right meaning. But even bigger than that is the Bible's historical context. We are separated from the world of the Bible by thousands of years. One culture doesn't always translate clearly into another.

If we are not careful when we read the Bible, we can end up making it say something it never said. This is how cults are formed. This is how people are deceived. If we don't do bible interpretation correctly, the Bible can be used as a weapon to attack, oppress, or manipulate. Sadly, this issue is not as uncommon as we may think.

We believe that the Bible is inspired by God.

2 Timothy 3:16 – <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.

2 Peter 1:21 - <sup>20</sup> Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, <sup>21</sup> or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.

Since we believe the Bible is inspired by God, we therefore believe it is the ultimate authority in the Church and in the Christian life. God has revealed himself, his ways, and his will to us through the incredible gift of the Bible. So when we approach it, we do so carefully, thoughtfully, and respectfully. You see, not all verses are created equal. Let me explain. While all of the Bible comes from God, that doesn't mean each word is directly his will to us.

For example: in the OT a man named Job is forced to endure horrific, unimaginable suffering. He loses all his children, all his money, and all his health on the same day. Job has a few friends that come to help him in the chaos. They are so overwhelmed at his suffering that they sit in silence with him for 7 days. They were great friends, until they opened their mouths. For the majority of the book of Job, these friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu counsel Job. Here is their counsel: the reason you are suffering is because God is punishing you for some sin you've committed. So confess that sin and God will remove all this pain.

Here's the problem: that's not true. Job is righteous and has done nothing to deserve this suffering. God condemns the friends in Job 42 for not speaking accurately about him. And these friends are eloquent in their speeches...what happens if you pull one of those verses out and read it to someone who is in the hospital or at a funeral? You have made it seem that their suffering is because of unconfessed sin. You have done incredible damage to them and used the Bible to do so.

TS – as we continue our study through 1 Corinthians, we now come to chapter 11. The section we are going to look at today will show us all of these issues: why historical context is important, not all verses are created equal, and that the Bible can be used to inflict much damage if we are not careful with it. In fact, one scholar called this section the most difficult passage in the Bible to rightly interpret.

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 - <sup>2</sup> I am so glad that you always keep me in your thoughts, and that you are following the teachings I passed on to you. <sup>3</sup> But there is one thing I want you to know: The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. <sup>4</sup> A man dishonors his head if he covers his head while praying or prophesying. <sup>5</sup> But a woman dishonors her head if she prays or prophesies without a covering on her head, for this is the same as shaving her head. <sup>6</sup> Yes, if she refuses to wear a head covering, she should cut off all her hair! But since it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut or her head shaved, she should wear a covering. <sup>7</sup> A man should not wear anything on his head when worshiping, for man is made in God's image and reflects God's glory. And woman reflects man's glory. <sup>8</sup> For the first man didn't come from woman, but the first woman came from man. <sup>9</sup> And man was not made for woman, but woman was made for man. <sup>10</sup> For this reason, and because the angels are watching, a woman should wear a covering on her head to show she is under authority. <sup>11</sup> But among the Lord's people, women are not independent of men, and men are not independent of women. <sup>12</sup> For although the first woman came from man, every other man was born from a woman, and everything comes from God. <sup>13</sup> Judge for yourselves. Is it right for a woman to pray to God in public without covering her head? <sup>14</sup> Isn't it obvious that it's disgraceful for a man to have long hair? <sup>15</sup> And isn't long hair a woman's pride and joy? For it has been given to her as a covering. <sup>16</sup> But if anyone wants to argue about this, I simply say that we have no other custom than this, and neither do God's other churches.

As you can see, this text is chock full of issues to wrestle with. Richard Hays writes, "It is impossible to give a fully confident interpretation of the passage."<sup>1</sup> That's encouraging. Virtually all scholars admit the challenges associated with this text, and pretty much none of them agree with the others. Why is this important to address? Do hair and headcoverings matter that much? What does Paul mean by "head?" Why does he sound patriarchal here when he sounded so progressive a few chapters ago?

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 183.

Probably the most helpful counsel comes from William Barclay. He wrote, "We must read this chapter in the light not of the twenty-first century but of the first."<sup>2</sup> Let's take the next few minutes and walk through this text, focusing on the historical background, what Paul is NOT saying, and why this matters to us today.

Notice first that this passage is bracketed by statements that help us to identify the nature of what he is talking about: end of v. 2 - "the teachings I passed on to you." The word he uses for "teachings" here is the word for "traditions." End of v. 16 - "no other custom than that..." So we have bookends on the text referring to this as traditions and customs. Meaning, this identifies this as more of a cultural issue for them than hard-lined doctrine for us. This head covering issue was an issue in their culture that doesn't necessarily cross over into our culture. Now, Paul does offer some eternal principles in here that absolutely do cross over to us today. We'll get to those in a bit.

v. 3 - <sup>3</sup> But there is one thing I want you to know: The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

Part of the challenge of this text is this word "head." Paul is utilizing a wordplay here by using the word both literally and figuratively. As setup for dealing with what men and women put onto their literal head, he starts off by making a point about a figurative head...like the head of a household, or sitting at the head of the table...a place of prominence.

It may seem here that Paul is setting up a patriarchal hierarchy that places women at the bottom. There is God at the top, then Christ, then men, then women. But he's not doing that and here is how we know...that's not the order he phrased it in. He bookends the verse with Christ, and ends it with God. So he isn't setting up an org chart here so women will know their place (sadly, this text has been used to do that). He is simply making a point that he will build on later...everyone has someone over them. Men and women both have someone over them. Even Christ has someone over him.

The crux of his argument in this text centers in v. 4-5 - <sup>4</sup> A man dishonors his head if he covers his head while praying or prophesying. <sup>5</sup> But a woman dishonors her head if she prays or prophesies without a covering on her head, for this is the same as shaving her head.

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 114.

In Greek culture of the time, much the same as Middle-Eastern culture of the time, and even of today, women wore head coverings (veils) whenever they were outside of their home. The veil did a number of things: it identified a woman as married, it symbolized her submission to the authority of her husband (remember, this is a cultural thing), and it was also a sign of her modesty, her chastity, and it legally protected her from unwanted advances from men.

Single women went out without a veil. So did prostitutes. An uncovered head sent a clear message...available and looking. So what happens then when men and women gather for Church and woman aren't wearing veils? First off, they are meeting in a home for church...women didn't wear veils at home. They call each other brother and sister...women didn't wear veils around family. And there is even more to this, some theology that is driving it.

Men and women were viewed quite differently in their culture. Men ran the world and women were property. Part of the significance of that veil is her submission to that authority of men. Well, Jesus erases all of that. Men and women are equal in God's Kingdom, of equal value, of equal worth, of equal importance.

Galatians 3:26-28 - <sup>26</sup> For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>27</sup> And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. <sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So at Church, women would take off the veil as a sign and symbol of her freedom in Christ. She is no longer subordinate. She is not a second-class citizen. She is no less than the men around her. That's good stuff. The Church should celebrate that! So why, then, does Paul say she needs to keep the veil on? And on top of that, that men would dishonor Christ (his head) if they had their head covered?

v. 7-10 - <sup>7</sup> A man should not wear anything on his head when worshiping, for man is made in God's image and reflects God's glory. And woman reflects man's glory. <sup>8</sup> For the first man didn't come from woman, but the first woman came from man. <sup>9</sup> And man was not made for woman, but woman was made for man. <sup>10</sup> For this reason, and because the angels are watching, a woman should wear a covering on her head to show she is under authority.

These verses get right to the heart of the matter regarding why men and women are given opposite instructions here. And it is the same bell Paul has been ringing for the entire letter. Men, Paul says, should not wear any head covering because they reflect God's glory. Men, in their culture, wore togas that were bunched up at the top that functioned like hoods. When men would go into pagan temples for worship, the first thing they did as a sign of respect and honor for that deity was pull up their hood and cover their head. So what is Paul doing? He is setting Christian worship apart from pagan idolatry. Your worship is to be different than their worship. Don't bring the pagan world into the Church.

Women, Paul says, would dishonor Christ if they uncovered their head. Why? Because in pagan worship in their day, women did the opposite of men. They didn't cover their head, they removed their veil to become exposed and vulnerable to their deity. This was most notably popular among the female prophetesses for Dionysius, Cybele, and Isis. So what is Paul doing? He is setting Christian worship apart from pagan idolatry. Your worship is to be different than their worship. Don't bring the pagan world into the Church. Though women had the freedom (and theological foundation) to remove their veil, they are to restrict their freedom (how many times has Paul made that same argument!!!) to ensure their Church does not reflect the pagan cults of their day. So once again Paul is concerned about the Church being the Church, God's called-out ones, living holy lives in an unholy world.

There is one more reason Paul gives for women to wear the veil, and I think it is the best one. Though v. 7-9 can sound misogynistic, they aren't. They are simply reminders of the theology of creation. God created Adam, the first man. From Adam, he made Eve, and Adam glories in her. She is "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh." Then Paul mentions that angels are watching. That's weird and scholars honestly have no idea what Paul means by that. The most likely and quasi-agreed upon view is that angels are present somehow in worship and join us in honoring the Lord. Angels, who by the way, according to Isaiah 6, cover themselves with their wings as a sign of respect and deference to the Lord.

So v. 10 – "For this reason..." What reason is that? All of this theology. He has just laid out the theological order of creation and God's revealed Word as the foundation for our practices in the Church...for this reason, the woman should wear the veil "to show she is under authority." I love this part...power-hungry men throughout history have used this verse to put women in their place. No matter what, they are under authority. True, but whose authority? Not a man. But The Man, Jesus Christ.

Maybe you noticed it when we read it...if not, let's point it out. V. 5 – **But a woman dishonors her head if she prays or prophesies without a covering on her head...**" Notice what that did not say. That did not say that a woman has no business praying or prophesying (modern day preaching/teaching) in Church. The NT assumes women are leading and teaching in the Church. But in their culture, and even among their church friends, this is a new position for women to be in. And they don't want to unintentionally promote that this woman who is teaching about Christ or is praying to her Lord is the same as a prophetess of Dionysius. So as a symbol of being under authority, the Christian woman covers her head. Why does she need to show she is under authority? Because the pagan worshipers were free from authority and were carefree before their deity. Christian worshipers are not free from authority. We are always under the authority of Scripture.

Lest Paul be misunderstood or mislabeled as patriarchal or misogynistic, the next couple verses clarify all of this: v. 11-12 - **<sup>11</sup> But among the Lord's people, women are not independent of men, and men are not independent of women. <sup>12</sup> For although the first woman came from man, every other man was born from a woman, and everything comes from God.**

Again, it may seem like his argument from creation put women into a second-class category, that simply is not the case. Men and woman are mutually interdependent and mutually under the authority of God.

One more final push is made here at the end to solidify the entire reason Paul would include this teaching, and what the Church today takes away from this text:

v. 13-15 - **<sup>13</sup> Judge for yourselves. Is it right for a woman to pray to God in public without covering her head? <sup>14</sup> Isn't it obvious that it's disgraceful for a man to have long hair? <sup>15</sup> And isn't long hair a woman's pride and joy? For it has been given to her as a covering.**

If you've ever wondered why there are some faith groups that require men to wear pants and women to wear only dresses (because men wear the pants, both literally and figuratively), and why the women all have long hair that is tied up in a bun...this is why. A misinterpretation of this text is the reason for all of that. They take a cultural, historical, teaching about genders in their own culture and apply it to today. It's not a sign of manhood to have short hair. Nor is it a sign of womanhood to have long hair. But it was then.

Here is the principle that supercedes culture: don't let the world define the Church. God's people are to be different, set apart, called out from the world. In Paul's day, men with long hair were viewed as effeminate and it was a cultural sign of homosexual promiscuity. In Paul's day, women with short hair were likely prostitutes or had been caught in adultery (punishment was shorn hair to let the world know...like a scarlet letter). So, again, what is Paul doing? You aren't like them. If you sin, you don't flaunt it, you confess it, repent of it, and ask the Lord to forgive. If you have sinned and the world has condemned you, you don't live in that condemnation. You bring it to the Lord and he forgives.

So once again, the primary emphasis of this letter is the purity of the Church. God's Church (owned by him, purchased by the blood of Jesus) is to be set apart in every way from the lost and sinful world around it. Christian worship is different. Christian leadership is different. Christian men and women are different. Christian lives are different. Because we reflect the glory of the Lord who made us, loves us, and has saved us.