Get Your Head Straight

This next section of scripture is not easy to decipher. It can be a “head scratcher”. The first clue to its meaning begins when you consider the epistle’s context so far. Paul has been answering issues he heard from church members directly and their letters. Which issues?

Chapter Issue

1. Division

2 & 3 Fleshly minded over Spiritually (Christ) minded

4 Pride / Humility

5 Sexual Immorality

6 Sueing / Swindling Christians

7 Avoiding Sexual Immorality

8,10 Eating food offered to Idols

9 Abuse of Liberty

11:2-16 ?

11:17-34 Abuse of the Lord’s Supper and fellowship meetings

I think it’s safe to assume that chapter 11 is not about stylish haircuts and hats! It’s continued correction of Corinthian fleshly habits. This section deals with the misconduct and bad attitude of some of the women there (and men too).

1 Cor. 11:2-5

Now I praise you because you remember me in all things, and hold on firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

But I want you to 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, dishonors his head.

But every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for it is one and the same thing as if she were shaved.

Notice the figure of speech, Word Clashing, which is the repetition of the same word with different meanings for emphasis. For instance, Ben Franklin once said after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, “We must all hang together, or we will all hang separately!” Same word – two meanings. This figure is seen with the word “head”, which is used 7 times in the above verses. The first three times it refers to authority, the next four to the literal physical head which is (at least supposedly) the authority of our bodies. The point is, God is the authority of Jesus, Jesus is the authority of males, and males are the authority of females. What? Was that a flying frying pan or a curling iron that just missed my head? This verse could be a contender for one of the most controversial in the Bible. (Perhaps that tells us a lot about today’s society.)

Our culture tells us that women are equal to men in every way. It is promoted that they are just as smart and able as men. (By the way, the Bible never contradicts this.) In fact, many women today say they don’t need men. They prefer to live alone or with other women. Many hate men. The reason that women have that attitude today is the same reason they had it in ancient times – they were abused at some point. For some, it’s been at almost every point. This is awful and absolutely not God’s will, who loves the ladies He made.

Gen. 1:27, 31a

So God created humankind in his own image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them.

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

God made males and females - two distinct creations. It wasn’t an accident. The genes, temperament, and anatomy are different. And at the end of the day, God said that “everything He made was very good”, including both men and women. So, when we have a problem with women wanting to be the same as men, or hating men, we have veered off from the original design of the Creator. What happened? Adam and Eve sinned and afterward God described the consequences to Eve with eye-opening insight.

Gen. 3:16,17

To the woman he said, “I will increase, yes, increase your pain and toil in childbirth. In pain and toil you will bear children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

From the REV commentary: God had created Eve to be a “helper corresponding to” Adam (Gen. 2:18), and God’s desire was that the two of them would work together and build a life, family, and society. But now, due to the sin of Eve and then Adam, the relationship between them was changed and perverted. In Genesis 3:16, God told Eve about the consequences of her sin and how the sin nature she had acquired by following Satan instead of obeying Him would show up in life. God described the consequences of Eve’s sin in two parts: the woman’s desire concerning her “man,” and that he would rule over her….

When it comes to the normal use of “desire,” scholars have suggested many ways that Eve could have desired Adam and women in general desire men, especially focusing on the desire for sex and the desire for security and provision. Since the desire mentioned in Genesis is specifically a result of the fallen nature of Eve (and thus all women), the desire would be a craving or longing that was intensified by the woman’s sin nature. C. F. Keil writes: “she was punished with a desire bordering upon disease (to have a violent craving for a thing).” Certainly there are exceptions, but in general, women have a strong desire to have a man in their life in spite of the fact that throughout most of history that meant being domineered and often mistreated. Also, especially until very recently women needed men in their lives because life was labor-intensive and dangerous, and it was important for a woman to have men in her life who could deal with much of the heavy work and who also could protect the family. Men desire women also, but due to a generally different mindset and [because of] their greater size and strength, they are less susceptible to abuse.

As was stated above, the second way that the Hebrew phrase can be understood is that the woman would have a “desire for” her husband, that is, a desire to control him, a desire that is contrary to him. The “desire” [the same word] in Genesis 4:7, “refers to sin’s desire to control and dominate Cain. …In Gen. 3:16 the LORD announces a struggle, a conflict between the man and the woman. She will desire to control him, but he will dominate her instead. This interpretation also fits the tone of the passage, which is a judgment oracle.”

Susan T. Foh writes about a woman’s desire for her husband: “These words mark the beginning of the battle of the sexes. As a result of the fall, man no longer rules easily; he must fight for his headship. Sin has corrupted both the willing submission of the wife and the loving headship of the husband. The woman’s desire is to control her husband (to usurp his divinely appointed headship), and he must master her, if he can. So the rule of love founded in paradise is replaced by struggle, tyranny, and domination.”

What a disaster! From cooperation to competition. From perfection to a perfect mess! As godly orientation waned over time, men dominated women because of their size advantage. A woman went from being the object of love to being almost just an object.

Gen. 4:9

Lamech took two wives; the name of one was Adah and the name of the other was Zillah.

Twice the sex, cooking and cleaning! Why? Because he could! How do you think it felt to be “took”? Not so good, I’d imagine. Probably stirred up insecurity and anger. This was the fate of ancient women. Even their fathers “gave them away” in exchange for a dowry. They were almost like property. Was this like it was in the garden? No. How could it get worse?

Gen. 6:1,2

And when man began to multiply on the face of the earth and daughters were born to them

the sons of God saw the daughters of man, that they were desirable, and they took for themselves wives of all that they chose.

Women became human Petrie dishes for spiritual genetic engineering! Perhaps it made them long for the days of becoming wife #2 or #3 instead of birthing monsters. Describing this situation as cosmically deranged only scratches the surface! No wonder God power -washed the planet!

Although humanity reset after the flood, men as loving leaders and women as first-class companions rarely resurfaced as God had envisioned in the garden. Noah’s family evidenced that. Soon after the flood, Noah got drunk and his son Ham “uncovered his father’s nakedness” with his mother. Male tyranny or abdication of their headship, cruelty, and female abuse began anew. Man’s sin nature and Satan influence was not washed away by the flood. It would take Jesus’s gift on Pentecost to begin the process and the Rapture to complete it. Until then, ungodly (fleshly oriented) men are mostly selfish, and ungodly (fleshly oriented) women are contentious and (understandably) insecure.

From the beginning, God designed men to lead (be the “head”) by diligent loving service to women. When a woman is loved, she wants to be led, protected, provided for and desires to submit to her man’s authority. She also wants to be “heard”, in other words, have input on decisions that affect them both. A loving husband does these things and earns his wife’s cooperation. An unloving husband selfishly uses his power advantage and “drags her along for the ride”, with resentment building under the surface and sometimes openly. This section of scripture highlights one such outburst of female foment.

Now I can hear the clamor of modern feminists, “We are equal to men in every way!” And some in the church will also echo this sentiment, twisting scripture…

Gal. 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus.

“See,” say the feminists, “the Bible says there is neither male nor female, for we all are one in Christ Jesus. We are not under a man as the head anymore. We are equal!” “OK”, I answer, “What’s that between your legs?” “Nothing!” responds the feminist. “Exactly!” I say, “and that’s how much being one in Christ effects our physical gender – nothing!” We are one and equal spiritually now in Christ, but not yet physically.

Michael Marlowe, Bible researcher writes: “We should notice at this point that Paul rejects the idea that God has ordained a ‘unisex’ spirituality for Christians. God, who created us male and female [before the fall], has ordained a masculine spirituality and a feminine spirituality. The influence of the Holy Spirit does not lead us to androgyny, but to a sanctified masculinity for men and a sanctified femininity for women.”

Power Rankings

More Marlowe: “The subordination of the woman to man is no more done away with in Christ than is the subordination of men to Christ. Christ himself is functionally subordinate to God the Father, and did not ‘seek equality’ with God.”

Phil. 2:5-7a

Have this mindset in you that was also in Christ Jesus,

who, though being in the appearance of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped at,

but instead he emptied himself by taking the appearance of a servant,

The REV Commentary adds: “After telling people to be humble and to look out for other people’s interests, he gives the example of Jesus, saying, “Have this mindset in you that was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Jesus was in the form of God, that is, as God’s Son he had divine position and authority, but he humbled himself and became a servant to others. Similarly, no matter what your position is in the Church, whether you are an apostle or have a leadership ministry, you are called to humble yourself and serve, not be served.”

This has been the cause of “the battle of the sexes” from the beginning. Men, instead of serving their wives, expect to be served by the wife and she gets bitter and “throws her head coverings off” as a way to protest and preserve self-respect. Men see it as a challenge to their authority and either cave in, allowing women to assume headship, or bully them into submission. Either way is wrong and a perversion from godly order. What’s that order?

1 Cor. 11:3

But I want you to 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.

God loves and leads Christ. Christ submits to and serves God. Christ loves and leads men. Men submit to and serve Christ. A man loves and leads his woman. The woman submits and serves her man. This is godly order. The usual breakdown point is when men don’t love their wives (as Christ did the church) and as a result, the wives don’t submit and serve their husband. And they burn their head covering and bras! Let’s discuss that.

Symbolic Importance of Clothing

In all ancient cultures the symbolic value of clothing was taken very seriously, even by Christians. Michael Marlowe again writes: “Jesus and the apostles took it for granted that their disciples appreciated the significance of clothing. In Matthew’s version of the parable of the wedding feast, there is a dramatic confrontation about proper attire when the King asks a certain man: ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ (Matthew 22:12) A modern reader is likely to find it strange that such importance is placed upon clothing, but the original hearers of this parable would not be inclined to sympathize with the underdressed man. They would think, rather, that the man who would not dress properly showed contempt for the King and his son, and obviously did not belong there. Indeed the man in the parable could offer no excuse for his own behavior, for ‘he was speechless.’” Clothing meant a lot to the ancients - even female head coverings and hair.

“Although in ancient times the customs of female dress varied, women of all cultures allowed their hair to grow long. Nowhere was short hair the custom for women. Short hair on a woman was a sign of grief or disgrace. Among Jews, Greeks, and Romans, adulteresses sometimes had their hair cropped as an extremely humiliating punishment for their crime. Among the Jews this was done as someone recited the words, “because thou hast departed from the manner of the daughters of Israel, who go with their head covered … therefore that has befallen thee which thou hast chosen.”

With that cultural background info, we are better able to understand this scripture section.

1 Cor. 11:2-5

Now I praise you because you remember me in all things, and hold on firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

But I want you to 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, dishonors his head.

But every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for it is one and the same thing as if she were shaved.

What traditions had Paul delivered to them? The godly order that is stated in verse 3 and that women should wear a head covering and men shouldn’t because of the word clashing idea about head / authority. Notice that neither men nor women are discouraged to pray or prophesy – only about the manner they do it. Assuming that female head coverings were culturally important, and that females performing something ‘uncovered’ at that time was a statement of equality or protest, can you imagine the distraction that caused? That’s like women taking off their top in protest and praying and prophesying! No one would pay attention to the prayer or prophecy! So where would God’s part be in the fellowship? He would be overshadowed by selfish protestors. Just as Paul heard of other problems in the church, he had heard of this too. Girls gone wild. “We got the spirit, too! We’re equal to men! I am woman, hear me roar!” Paul is saying that fellowship is the place to hear “God roar!”, figuratively speaking.

Notice again that God doesn’t reprove the prayer or prophecy – only the head coverings. He wants there to be a godly distinction (not a distraction) in gender.

1 Cor. 11:6-9

For if a woman is not covered, then she should cut off her hair. But if it is a shame to a woman to have her hair be cut or shaved off, let her be covered.

For a man indeed has an obligation not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of the man.

For the man did not come from the woman, but the woman from the man;

for indeed, man was not created for the woman, but the woman for the man.

This is some of the spiritual history of the genders in light of the culture of that day. Do we have grave concerns over clothing today? Perhaps a safe answer in America is “No”, as long as clothing is not distracting from Christ. Head coverings and hair could have become distractions then, but not so much now.

1 Cor. 11:10

This is why the woman has an obligation to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

There is a scholarly theory on this verse that states that according to Greek medical knowledge at that time, hair was thought to be part of the human reproductive system. This was espoused by none other than Hippocrates, the ancient father of medicine and first great scientific authority. It was thought that covering a woman’s hair in a public religious ceremony would shield her from unwanted attention from spiritual beings like those who caused the devastation in Genesis 6. Although this seems bizarre in the extreme, we should keep in mind the anatomical and scientific knowledge at that time, not ours. We know better (at least we think we do) and they operated considering their best available knowledge. For a deeper discussion of this theory, see the podcast at the end of this sharing and Michael Heiser’s book, The Unseen Realm. What do I think? I think Paul thought it was important for their protection and betterment. We may never know exactly what “because of the angels” means. We can ask Paul one day – hopefully soon!

1 Cor. 11:11,12

Nevertheless in the Lord, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.

For as the woman is from the man, so is the man also by the woman, but all things are from God.

Both men and women started life intertwined and were made to work together. They were to be mutual comforts and blessings, not one a slave, and the other a tyrant.

1 Cor. 11:13

Judge among yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God uncovered?

Doesn’t even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?

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

Most of the Corinthian saints thought that women should be respectfully covered. If put to a vote, it would be found that only a minority of ladies were causing a stir, drawing attention to themselves over their prayers or prophecy. The leadership needed to help these ladies reestablish order. Leadership abdication is a regrettable consistent theme in this epistle.

1 Cor. 11:16

But if any man seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

If anyone wants to argue about hair length or head coverings, Paul/God wants it known that the churches of God – those established previously elsewhere, like in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and Antioch, etc. - had no hard and fast customs on these issues. The “customs”  
that mattered were the proper authority order and keeping the focus on Christ in the fellowship meetings, not extraneous issues. Every church will have its own customs that may be a combination of local culture and their own choice. Some have music with mostly percussion (drums, tambourines, etc.) while others are vocal only while others insist on a choir, while others use a million-dollar pipe organ. The point is… it’s up to you – as long as the godly order is right:

God

Christ

Men

Women

God wants members and visitors to talk about God and Christ when they leave, not hair, hats or tambourines. Participants must be built up in the gospel. Visitors must meet Christ. Salvation is an eternal reality. Other things Satan promotes are only temporary distractions. The church must not “major on the minors” but “major on the Major – (or the General) Jesus Christ”! We fight for Christ and each other, not about eternally insignificant stuff.

https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/podcast/naked-bible-86-the-head-covering-of-1-corinthians-1113-15/