

Heads and Headship

I Corinthians 11:2-3

I'm going to read verses 2-16 of I Corinthians 11, but we're going to focus this morning only on verses 2-3. This will allow us to take our time and properly lay a foundation in core doctrinal truth before we explore the ways to apply and live out that truth practically next week by focusing on verses 4-16.

² Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. ³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵ but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶ For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. ⁷ For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; ¹² for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. ¹³ Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, ¹⁵ but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶ If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. – I Corinthians 11:2-16, ESV

Some Things Paul Says Are Hard to Understand—2 Peter 3:16

When we were studying the Gospel of John a couple of years ago, I introduced the series with a famous quote, often attributed to Augustine, that "the Gospel of John is deep enough for an elephant to swim and shallow enough for a child not to drown." This is not true only of the Gospel of John, of course. The Bible itself is clear enough so that anyone can read it for themselves and, by the grace of the Holy Spirit working in their minds and hearts, come to know truly the God of the Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ found in the pages of Scripture. I am reminded that some of the greatest preachers and teachers of God's word had little formal education. John Bunyan, for example, who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* and who knew the Scriptures so well, was only a tinker by trade and the son of a tinker, a kind of fix-it-man who repaired pots and pans and cutlery. He had almost no formal education.

But the Bible is not equally simple in all places. I couldn't even tell you how old I was when I first learned John 3:16, "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.*" (Of course, I memorized it first in the King James version.) I also remember early childhood days of learning Psalm 23, "*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want*" and The Lord's Prayer, "*Our Father, who are in heaven*" These simple truths of God's love, my need for salvation, God's gift of His Son, the need to believe in Jesus, the goodness of God in shepherding me through life, the simple power of praying for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven – all of these things I have known and understood at some level since childhood.

But not everything is so clear. I have been diligently studying the Bible for decades, since my teenage years. And today we come to what I still find to be one of the trickier passages in the Bible, definitely one of the most

difficult in all the New Testament to properly understand and apply. We were talking about this briefly at men's group around my fire in my backyard on Wednesday night, when Shawn reminded me of what Peter said in 2 Peter 3 –

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

– 2 Peter 3:15-16, ESV

“There are some things in them that are hard to understand” – Thank you, Peter! But then Peter also warns us that there's a danger in these “hard to understand” things: “the ignorant and unstable twist [them] to their own destruction.” So, we need to be careful, for certainly we do not want to be found twisting Scripture.

This passage, which we are considering today and next week, is difficult to interpret accurately for three reasons:

1. Part of what Paul teaches here seems clear enough, but the plain sense of it surely runs contrary to what our culture has taught us to believe concerning men and women.
2. Some of what Paul teaches here as normal practice for worship seems to be heavily steeped in first-century cultural values and practices that seem very foreign to us: What exactly is the head-covering Paul seems to be referencing? What did it look like? Why was it proper for women to wear it and not men? What did wearing it communicate?
3. Some of the passage is just really pretty unclear. What in the world does Paul mean in verse 10 when he says a woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head “because of the angels”? Also, when is Paul talking about husbands and wives and when is he talking about men and women in general? And what is his point about hair length?

So, we're dealing with some uncomfortable counter-cultural truths and some confusing cultural practices and some unclear meaning of certain words, phrases, and ideas. And, finally, we might rightly ask, what does all of this really have to do with the Gospel and with right worship?

I. Heads: Literal and Metaphorical

Let's look again at verses 2-10:

² Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. ³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵ but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶ For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. ⁷ For a man ought

not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

What word do we hear most often repeated in this difficult passage? Head. So, if we're going to understand this passage, we're going to have to understand what Paul means by head, especially since he seems to use it in two different ways – both literally and metaphorically, or symbolically. The first use is metaphorical, or as a symbol representing a spiritual reality, in verse 3: *“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.”* And then Paul goes on to apply these spiritual truths with instructions about literal head coverings and hair length.

But what does Paul mean by “head” here? People have proposed two different options: Head could mean “authority” or “rule,” or else Head could mean “source.” The meaning is further shaped by what Paul means by the words translated as “wife” and “husband” in this verse. In Greek, the word for “husband” is the same as the word for “man,” while the word for “wife” is the same as the word for “woman.” In other words, Greek has no special words for husband and wife; it just uses the words man and woman. You have to let the context guide you as to whether in a particular case it refers to a man and a woman or to a husband and wife.

So, I'm going to introduce you to three key principles for right Bible interpretation, and then we'll apply them to verse 3 and its use of “head”:

1. **Context is key.** What a word means in a particular passage is guided by the context of that passage.
2. **Scripture interprets Scripture:** The meaning of a word as it is used in Scripture is going to be best illuminated by how that word is used in the rest of Scripture, not in secular literature of the day.
3. **Clearer passages shine light on more obscure passages:** When a passage is not clear on its own, look for helpful light from other, clearer passages.

So . . .

1. **Context:** In the context of this passage, Paul is talking about the need, in his cultural context, for a woman to cover her head while she is praying or prophesying, and for a man not to cover his head. Then, in verse 10, he seems to be referring to this head covering as a symbol of authority on her head, or simply as authority on her head. So, the context does seem to be dealing with the idea of authority. Ah, yes, but the passage also talks about the fact that woman was taken from man – that Adam's side was the source of the creation of woman, and also that men come from women ever since, that we have our source in women. So, the context also discusses source. Not a definitive answer here.
2. **Word Usage in Scripture:** Here we start to get clarification. What Bible did the Apostles read and teach from? What was their copy of the Scriptures, which Paul would have taught to the Corinthians? It is the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. And in this Bible, the word *kepha*, which is the Greek word for “head” is used literally for heads and metaphorically only for authority, leader, chief, ruler- the head of the tribe, the head of the army or the nation. And even in the rest of the New

Testament, the word “head” is never used symbolically or metaphorically for a “source” or “origin” – although it is sometimes used that was in secular Greek literature, in a few cases.

3. **Other Clear Passages of Scripture:** Finally, we can look to what Paul teaches more clearly in other places about husbands and wives:

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

- Ephesians 5:22-28, ESV

Here, it’s pretty clear that the idea that the husband is the head of the wife is a call for the wife to submit to her husband, to be under his authority, just as the church is under Christ’s, and for the husband to sacrificially love his wife, even as Christ loves the church.

So, Paul seems to be teaching pretty clearly that the husband is the head of the wife as the God-ordained authority, to lead, protect, and provide, just as Christ leads, protects, and provides for His people. I told you this was culturally offensive.

I also think Ephesians 5 gives us the clarity to understand that Paul is talking about wives and their husbands in verse 3 and not all men and women in general. The head of every wife is her husband, but the head of every woman is not every man. Paul is talking about role relationships in marriage; he’s not making a blanket, sexist statement about all men and all women.

So, what do we do with this counter-cultural teaching? We have two clear streams of teaching now emerging in this passage: The husband is the head, meaning the authority, and the woman should cover her head, a sign of being in submission to her husband’s headship. A husband’s headship and a wife’s head covering. What are we to make of this? How do we interpret and apply it in America in the year 2020?

Well, there’s basically four different approaches people have taken:

1. **Ignore.** Some people – perhaps most Christians, honestly – simply ignore this passage and don’t think about or respond to it in any way. But, it is here in the Bible, God’s holy word, so . . .
2. **Reject.** Some people take both of these truths – of the husband’s headship and the wife’s head covering – and reject them as outdated, culturally irrelevant relics, to be tossed on the ash-heap of history. The problem with doing that is that Paul roots his teaching in this passage not in cultural norms of his day

but in the relationship between Christ and the Father within the Trinity, and in the nature of being created male and female. And I don't think it's an accident that when our culture decided to reject the concept of a husband's headship, it soon thereafter started rejecting the idea that people are made male and female.

3. **Wholly adopt.** The third approach is to wholly adopt everything Paul says here, in its entirety. So, some churches teach that women need to wear veils or shawls or head coverings during worship. R.C. Sproul thought this was what this passage taught, so this isn't such a strange concept. To be clear, as far as we know, Paul is not teaching that women should wear an oppressive burka-style black gown, but probably just a prayer shawl over the head. However, I think it's fair to ask if wearing a head covering today carries the same symbolic meaning that it did in Paul's day, and I don't think it does. It communicates being old-fashioned or maybe a little legalistic or uptight, maybe, if it communicates anything at all. Also, what about the fact that Paul says women should have their heads covered when they're praying or prophesying – and in our worship services, only the elders pray aloud or preach or teach in the worship service. Paul doesn't say you need to sit and listen with your head covered or even sing with your head covered.
4. **Adapt:** This brings us to our fourth option, to adapt the truth of what Paul is teaching to our own cultural context in a meaningful way. So, can we understand and accept the truth of what Paul is teaching and apply it meaningfully in a contextually appropriate way? We're going to take this fourth option, laying the foundation this morning in the great truth Paul is teaching and then fleshing out the application more next week.

II. Headship in Marriage and the Trinity

Let's start with this truth of the headship of the husband:

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. – v. 3

First of all, we need to see how carefully Paul grounds this hierarchy of headship in the relationship between Christ and God the Father. We believe that God exists eternally in three persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and that these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. They are fully equal in essence, in power, and in glory. But each person of the Godhead has a distinct role. The Father sends the Son. The Son is sent by the Father. Even before that, in Creation, the Father spoke the Word of the Son, and the Son was the Word spoken by the Father. The Father and the Son send the Spirit, Who comes and unites us to the Son. Each member of the Trinity has a role to play in Creation and in Redemption, and in these roles, there is a clear hierarchy. But three persons are fully and equally one true God.

Our modern culture has taken its stand against hierarchy, and they have declared that all hierarchies reinforce inequality. And in a fallen world with sinful human beings, it's easy enough to see why people say that. Among sinners, hierarchy does often lead to oppression and arrogance and abuse. And yet hierarchy is as unavoidable as the air we breathe; it is woven into the very fabric of Creation. And so, we need to understand what it means to have a loving hierarchy between full equals who respect, value, honor, and love each other. And the only place

we're going to see that is in God Himself.

And so, the husband, if he is going to be a proper head for his wife, must be under Christ's headship. He must hear the call of Christ saying, *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* When a man comes under Christ's headship, truly, what does he find? Christ serves those He leads. *"For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give Himself as a ransom for many."* Jesus washed the feet of His disciples before He picked up His cross for them.

He explained why He washed their feet:

"Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. – John 13:12-17, ESV

This is how husbands are called to be the heads of their wives, even as Christ is the suffering, self-sacrificing, servant-Savior. And men are to be under Christ's headship, even as Christ put Himself under God's headship – Jesus came not to do His own will but the will of Him who sent Him. So, we, as husbands, do not serve our own interests but the interest of Christ.

This gives wives safety and security, a place of true love and honor, as they submit to the headship of their husbands. A wife respects her husband and follows his lead, as he looks to Christ as both his leader and the model for his leadership. It does NOT mean that wives submit to abuse from their husbands, for that is not Christ-like leadership, nor it is loving and supportive for a wife to tolerate, accept, or submit to abuse from her husband. She is to lovingly support her husband in following after Christ and in being a Christ-like leader to the family.

I love how Matthew Henry describes the creation of Eve from the side of Adam, written in 1708:

"The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved."

A husband's headship over his wife dishonors Christ if it is not an imitation of Christ. Christ loves the church and gives Himself for her, first, taking the initiative, self-sacrificially, laying down His life in love for her, and blessing the church incredibly in the process. In response to the love of Christ, the church humbles herself, trusts Christ, follows His lead, is loyal to Him, and serves His interests in the world – or, at least, we should.

And what we're going to see next week as we get into head coverings and hair length and other issues – "because of the angels"? – is that our worship on Sunday morning as we gather should be a large picture of what our individual marriages are supposed to be: a reflection of Christ's love for His bride and His bride's submission to Christ.

Coming Under the Headship of Christ

A key part of the glorious Gospel we believe and proclaim together is that we have come under the headship of our suffering servant-Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who brings us under His loving arms, close to His pierced side, where He treasures us far better than Adam ever treasured Eve.

I love what Matthew Henry goes on to say in his commentary, after describing how Eve was made from a rib from Adam's side: "Adam was a figure of him that was to come; for out of the side of Christ, the second Adam, his spouse the church was formed, when he slept the sleep, the deep sleep, of death upon the cross, in order to which his side was opened, and there came out blood and water, blood to purchase his church and water to purify it to himself."

Christ is our covering, our Head, our authority, and we are under His loving provision and protection. His side was pierced to provide our forgiveness and cleansing, to purchase us for Himself, to bring us close to His side. And husbands and wives are to display the Gospel story of loving, sacrificial headship and devoted Christ-like love and the church's bride-like response of humility and submission. We are a living display as a gathered people and as husbands and wives within this gathered people every Lord's Day morning.

I have a question for you, as we close: Have you come under the covering of Christ? Are you under the loving protection of His headship and His sacrificial love for you? I hope you have. He is our only salvation. Apart from the covering of His headship, we are exposed to our sin and the eternal dangers of it, to the world and its deceptions, and even to the wrath of God we deserve for our rebellion against Him. Only coming under Christ shields us, protects us, provides for us, covers us. So, if you do not know Him, come to Him right now, by believing in Him and asking Him to be your covering, your head.