

Disappearing Hats **1 Corinthians 11:2-16**

When I was a child growing up in church, many women wore hats each Sunday. They created some problems.

- Sometimes you couldn't see because some rather fancy hat blocked your view.
- Sometimes church became a fashion parade.
- Sometimes people spent so much on their hats, they had nothing left to put in the offering.

But it was all done in an effort to be faithful to tonight's passage.

Women rarely wear hats to church these days – at least not in the many churches I've been in over the last 20 years. Why not? Have they chopped this passage out of their Bibles? No – although it may be many of them have relegated it to the "too hard" basket. Rather, Christians have generally come to a different understanding of this passage than was common 50 years ago.

The Difficulties

At the outset, we need to admit this is a difficult passage. You may find this hard going. It requires careful thought – and, even after that, not everything's clear. But it's right and proper that we understand it as best we can. As an example of the difficulties, I have two commentaries on my shelves, each written in the last 30 years by respected evangelicals and each having opposite conclusions:

- One says this passage primarily teaches the subordination of women.
- The other says this passage primarily teaches that woman is not subordinate to man.

How can they reach such opposing viewpoints on the

meaning of the same passage?

I want to quickly run through the main reasons why this passage is difficult. You may find this uncomfortable. You may prefer I simply told you what the passage means – unless, of course, I think it means something different to what you think it means. The reason we feel uncomfortable is we prefer God's word be plain – black-and-white, as it were. We want something that's certain and easy to understand. We feel somewhat uneasy when people introduce uncertainties – shades of grey.

But there's no virtue in asserting certainty where it's not present. There's no virtue pretending there aren't difficulties where it's plain they exist. In the long run, it doesn't help people – either in their understanding of the Bible or in the way they relate to each.

So, what are the difficulties in this passage? **First**, there's an overall contextual difficulty. We're in that part of the letter where Paul answers their questions. Usually, he introduces the answer to a new question in a certain way. You can see that at 7:1; 8:1 and 12:1. That introduction isn't in 11:2. So, is this a new topic, or is it still part of the answer to the previous question?

- On the one hand, it looks like a new topic. Food sacrificed to idols isn't mentioned in these verses. It's about head coverings.
- On the other hand, it's possible Paul's still dealing with the topic of how Christian freedom is to be used. He used the example of sacrifices to idols in chapters 8 to 10. This may now be a second example to illustrate the same basic principles.

Secondly, there's the difficulty of exactly what Paul talks about here. He refers to covering the head. How much of the head?

- Is he talking about a small cap such as Jews wear?
- Is he talking about a prayer shawl?
- Is he talking about hats?
- Is he talking about full head coverings – such as Moslem women wear?
- Is he imposing a Jewish custom on Gentiles?

Paul knew exactly what he was talking about, as did the Corinthians. But the passage itself isn't totally clear.

Some look at the end of the passage where it talks about a woman's long hair being her glory and her covering and argue that Paul simply says a woman should have long hair and have it properly bound up when she prays or prophesies. They work through the whole passage on that basis – that it's talking about hair, not hats.

Or, to take another example, what's the context of this praying and prophesying? Is it in church? In public? At home? In private? Most people assume Paul talks about what goes on in church – and I think that's most likely – but there's nothing specific in the passage that proves that. It's possible this passage refers to private devotions.

Thirdly, there are difficulties in interpreting specific words. The one argued about most is the word translated *head*. Sometimes it's used literally and sometimes metaphorically. Look at verse 3:

Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

Each time there, the word *head* is used metaphorically.

This bit of my body isn't literally Christ. A metaphor's used – and so through the rest of the verse.

Now look at verse 4:

Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head,

The first time the word *head* is used there, it seems to be literal. Paul seems to talk about a physical covering on a physical head. That's the usual interpretation – though it's possible to interpret even that one metaphorically: *every man who prays or prophesies with Christ covered ...* When we come to the second use of *head* in verse 4 – the bit about dishonouring – most people interpret that one metaphorically as a reference to Christ. Yet, it's also possible to interpret that one literally to refer to bringing dishonour on himself.

Then, just to add extra confusion, people argue over the exact way in which *head* is used as a metaphor:

- Some argue the idea of the metaphor is the idea of *source* – that Christ's the head of the man in the sense that Christ is the source of the man.
- Others argue the idea of the metaphor is the idea of *authority* – that Christ's the head of the man in the sense that man submits to Christ's authority.

Two other words that are difficult to work out are the words for *man* and *woman*. Look at verse 3 again:

Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

The NIV is consistent throughout this passage – it keeps using the words *man* and *woman*. Other translations alternate – sometimes using *man*, sometimes using *hus-*

band. The one Greek word is capable of both meanings. It's similar with *woman* and *wife*. You have to work out which is appropriate from the context. So in this passage, does Paul speak about men and women, husbands and wives, or a mixture of both? It's not easy to work out. Sometimes the translators make the decision for you – and that makes it even harder to work out because it disguises the problem.

There are other difficulties as well – but I do want to say something positive about this passage tonight, so I'll spare you those. But I wanted you to appreciate that this isn't an easy passage. Paul commends something to them – but it's not easy for us to work out exactly what.

The General Thrust

So what positive things can we say about these verses? First of all, Paul's general direction's quite clear:

- Men, when they pray or prophesy, must have the head uncovered.
- Women, when they pray or prophesy, must have the head covered.

That's plain in verses 4 and 5 – and the rest of the passage affirms that with various reasons. What are the reasons?

First, there's tradition. Verse 2:

I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.

Obviously there's some question as to whether they maintained this particular tradition. The way Paul writes certainly suggests some of the women were taking a liberationist attitude against the traditions.

Also, verse 16:

If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God.

That is, all the other churches do the same thing and it's not up to you Corinthians to make new rules. This is the way it's done everywhere. This isn't Paul's main argument – but it is there in the passage.

His **second** reason has to do with headship: verses 3 to 6. As I mentioned earlier, some argue the metaphor behind the idea of *head* is *source* – that Christ's the head of the man in the sense that Christ is the source of the man; the man's the head of the woman in the sense that man is the source of the woman. You can find examples of the word *head* being used that way – the *head* of the river is the *source* of the river. However, I don't think that's the way Paul usually uses the word; nor do I think it makes sense in this passage. Down in verse 12, Paul refers to woman being the *source* of man – in the sense that women are the ones who give birth – yet nowhere in the passage does it say that woman is the *head* of man.

Here, I think the traditional interpretation's right. *Head* is used in the sense of *authority*. There's a chain of authority described in verse 3: God, then Christ, then man, then woman. That's the order God established. It's to do with governing authority.

- As we read the New Testament, it's consistent that Jesus submits Himself to the Father. It doesn't mean Jesus isn't equal with the Father or is somehow inferior to the Father – rather, that Jesus continually voluntarily submits to the Father's will.
- Likewise, man is to submit to God – that's the proper relationship. Because man's a rebel, we don't

always see that submission demonstrated in practice – but that's the proper order of things. On this occasion, man isn't equal with God. We definitely have a lower status.

- At the next point in the chain, woman is to submit to man – at whatever level Paul uses the words *woman* and *man* in this passage.
 - He may refer to leadership in the church.
 - He may refer to the marriage relationship.
 - He may refer to something else altogether.

Now in connection with that, and to symbolise the differing relationships of authority,

- when men pray and prophesy, they're to have their heads uncovered; and
- when women pray and prophesy, they're to have their heads covered.

Why? What's the connection? Why does the man being under Christ's authority mean his head's uncovered and the woman being under the man's authority mean her head's covered? I have no idea – but that's the connection Paul draws.

The **third** reason, which is very closely connected with the second, comes from the order of creation: verses 7 to 12. He goes back to Genesis 1 and 2. When God first created man, we're told there's a problem. Man's alone. Among all the animals, there's not a suitable soul-mate for Adam. And so God puts Adam to sleep and forms a woman from one of Adam's ribs.

That order, says Paul, has significance. Woman's made from man, not man from woman. Woman's made for man, not man for woman. Yes, both are made in the

image of God and given dominion over the rest of the earth – yet, the order of creation speaks of the man's authority over the woman.

It's not inferiority on the part of the woman. Verses 11 and 12 emphasise the balance. We find the concepts of authority and submission difficult because we think in terms of inferiority and superiority – and we resist the notion of acknowledging and submitting ourselves to our superiors. In terms of man and woman, Paul isn't talking about inferiority or superiority. He describes an interdependence. The two can't declare an ungodly independence of each other. This is consistent with the rest of the Bible. Man and woman are equal. Yet, there remains this level of authority.

A **fourth** reason is hinted at in verse 10 – *because of the angels*. Paul doesn't develop this idea and people today have all sorts of guesses.

- Some try to connect it with Genesis 6 where the sons of God (perhaps angels) married the daughters of men. They suggest that by leaving their heads uncovered, these women somehow tempt the angels to do the wrong thing.
- Some point out the word translated *angels* could also be translated *messengers*. They suggest that when the bishops (the messengers) are in their pulpits on Sunday mornings and look out on a sea of women displaying their glorious hair they are distracted from their message and tempted to lust after these provocative women.
- Some suggest that by uncovering their heads they demonstrate an attitude to overthrow the right order of creation and this somehow insults the angels.

Ultimately, we don't know.

Paul's **fifth** reason comes from the sense of what's proper and fitting: verses 13 to 15. This argument doesn't seem to have much force with us – because the sense of what's fitting varies with different cultures and changes over time. We're used to seeing women pray with their heads uncovered. That seems natural to us – so natural that we wonder why on earth Paul makes an issue of it. Yet, their sense of what's fitting must have included the idea that women should pray with their heads covered – otherwise Paul's appeal to it wouldn't make much sense.

It's worth noting that even though fashions may change over place and time, they can still be used to make a point. Think back to the 1960s when men began to wear their hair long in western cultures. Why did they do that? Were they simply tired of the old hairstyles? Didn't it include an expression of rebellion against parents and their oppressive hairstyles and rebellion against the traditions of society? Hairstyles can still be used as symbolic of our attitudes.

So to summarise. We may not fully understand the context of this disagreement between Paul and the Corinthians nor exactly what he means by covering their heads. But it's quite clear he expects men to leave their heads uncovered when they pray and prophesy and women to cover theirs. And he gives a series of reasons to support his position:

- the traditions of the apostles and the churches;
- the matter of headship;
- the order of creation;
- because of the angels; and

- because it is culturally fitting and proper.

The Implications

Does it have any implications for us? I want to suggest four. **First**, note the equality – not biological equality, but equality of person. This isn't the main thrust of the passage, but it is there. This passage doesn't say the man is superior to the woman – or better than the woman or more important than the woman or more qualified than the woman. Jesus submits to His Father Head, though they're equal. Likewise, the fact the woman's asked to display the authority of the man doesn't mean she isn't equal with him. There's a strong interdependence.

Secondly, there is headship. In our egalitarian and liberated society we may not particularly like that. Our culture may teach us to rebel against it. Yet this is the underlying thrust of the passage. There is a difference in the way men and women are to relate to one another and to God. For this church it was: Men pray with their heads uncovered; women are to cover theirs. I don't think it's possible to avoid that conclusion. Whatever Paul means by covering the head, the woman's to do it and the man's not to do it – and, in Paul's argument, it's related directly back to the issue of headship. That difference is to be displayed in their behaviour.

Thirdly, we can't simply dismiss Paul's argument out-of-hand as culturally irrelevant today. Part of it may be culturally irrelevant, as I'll say in a moment. But we can't therefore dismiss the whole passage as irrelevant. Paul's reasons are many-sided. Some are highly theological. Those theological arguments won't change – not unless you can somehow change God's order or the order of

creation. Paul argues not simply from what may or may not have been fashionable in Corinth at the time – he argues from the way men and women were made. That remains relevant today – whether we like it or not.

Fourthly, the symbolic meaning seems lost in our community. The particular behaviour Paul encourages here had a certain symbolic meaning at that time – women covering their heads somehow symbolised being under authority. We don't understand exactly how it symbolised that – but, from Paul's argument, it is fairly clear it did.

If a woman turned up to church with her head covered today, what would you assume?

- It's windy outside and she didn't want to get her hair tangled?
- She didn't have time to wash her hair and she's trying to hide it?
- She wants to climb higher in the church fashion-stakes?
- She's covering up a few grey hairs?
- She read this passage in the Bible and, like a good legalist, follows it to the letter?

Would you conclude she covered her head to demonstrate that man's the head of the woman? Of course not. The symbol simply doesn't carry that meaning in our culture.

So what should we do?

- We could re-educate our people so they understood the symbol and then reintroduce the symbol into our churches – if we could work out exactly what the symbol was. We could teach our people this symbol indicates you aren't usurping the role of headship. We may have to work out the details: do

you only need the covering when you pray out loud, or should you wear it all the time? And there would be other issues like that.

I'm not convinced that's the best procedure for that symbol won't mean anything to those outside the church – it would just become another external symbol that caused an unnecessary cultural barrier between us and them (perhaps like the Brethren women wearing scarves).

- We could find a new culturally relevant symbol – a current symbol from our own culture that means the same today as what this head covering meant in Paul's day. Unfortunately, no particular symbol from our culture springs readily to mind. Part of the reason for that is that our culture has rejected this particular value and has tried to eradicate any symbols associated with it.
- We could ensure the reality of what this symbolised in the first century was still a reality in our Christian communities today. In the long run, the symbol isn't the important thing – what it symbolises is.

Once again, the overall impression I get from this passage is that some in Corinth tried to push their Christian freedom in ungodly directions. They used their freedom to assert their own rights – their own ideas, even their own sinfulness – rather than using their freedom as an opportunity to submit to one another and to serve one another.