

HAIR AND HEADSHIP 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

by Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
with Ra McLaughlin

Paul began a discussion (11:2-14:40) of yet another area of controversy and problems among the Corinthians: worship. He addressed three important subjects: the question of head coverings for women in public worship (11:2-16); the observance of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34); and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in worship (12:1-14:40). These issues specifically related to the Corinthian church in its particular cultural setting, but Paul's responses to the Corinthians' problems have implications for every church in every age.

WORDS OF PRAISE (11:2)

Paul began on a very positive note, in contrast to the very negative opening of the next section (11:17). He affirmed the Corinthians, saying, "**I praise you.**" Positive words like these were unusual in Paul's writings because he spent most of his time correcting problems in the church. He would return to correcting before the end of this chapter, but opened his discussion of worship by pointing out something they had done correctly. In so doing, Paul illustrated the importance of encouraging believers. The tendency of many church leaders is constantly to correct and rebuke. Paul certainly did much of that in his writings, but he also knew the value of noticing where believers were doing well and congratulating them on their successes.

One can only imagine the relief that came to the Corinthians when they heard the opening words of this chapter. **I praise you for remembering me in everything.** **Everything** (NIV, NASB, NRSV) in this sense means "all kinds of things" ("all things" NKJV). As Paul's mind moved toward matters of worship, he apparently was satisfied that many of his teachings were being followed by a majority of the Corinthian believers. So, he praised the church **for holding to the teachings** he had **passed on** to them. In Paul's day, "pass on" was technical rabbinical terminology for the official, sacred transmission of religious traditions (compare 11:23). Paul probably hoped this positive word would help them attend to the corrections he was about to offer, first subtly (11:3-12) then confrontationally (11:13-16).

Verse 16 reveals that Paul was dealing with a somewhat controversial matter (11:16). Apparently, some people within the Corinthian church had rejected the common practice of the church that wives should cover their heads in public worship.

Paul was satisfied that a good number in the church understood and practiced this policy, but he still felt the need to explain the reasons that everyone should continue it.

The passage makes plain that Paul was concerned with public worship, not with life in general. Although having implications for everyday life, his words focused on prayer and prophecy (the teaching and preaching of God's Word) (11:4-5), which would have taken place primarily when believers gathered. Corinth was cosmopolitan in Paul's day, and its citizens reflected much diversity of custom and worship practice. Naturally, Paul and the Corinthian Christians were keenly aware of the differences between themselves and unbelievers, whether Jew or Greek (9:20-21), and these differences raised all kinds of questions. In this passage, Paul was particularly concerned with how men and women within the Corinthian church behaved toward each other in their worship meetings. Should they have imitated what others did in worship? How should they have been different?

Paul's answers to these kinds of questions derived from three basic concerns that he mentioned from time to time in this and other chapters. First, he was committed to honoring God by applying the principles of Scripture to worship (11:3,8-9,12,23-26; 14:21,34). Second, he was concerned that believers show due regard for each other in their worship times (11:7,10,21-22,33-34; 12:14-16,21-26; 13:1-2; 14:1-5,12,16-17,19,26,34-35,39). Third, he was concerned with the testimony of the Corinthian worship meetings before unbelievers (11:14-15; 14:22-25,35). This chapter focuses on how the practice of head coverings for women reflects these three concerns. Why should women cover their heads in worship? Paul's answer is threefold: 1) it is true to divine commands; 2) it honors husbands in worship; and 3) it reflects the cultural expectations of decency in their day.

In this passage Paul shifted without notice between the relationships of men and women in general, and husbands and wives in particular. In Greek the terms usually translated "man" and "woman" are flexible enough to be used in both senses. Great care must be taken to remember that Paul's words at any moment may apply generally to men and women, to husbands and wives, or to both. His central focus, however, was on the behavior of husbands and wives in worship.

THE DIVINE ORDER (11:3)

Paul began his discussion with a triad of sentences revealing his concern for following the order God had ordained. He asserted that three parallel relationships exist: 1) **Christ** in relation to **every man**; 2) **man** in relation to **woman** (probably husbands in relation to wives, not men and women in general; compare Eph. 5:23); and 3) **God** (the Father) in relation to **Christ**. In each relationship, he described the former as the **head** of the latter. That Paul taught the existence of parallels between these relationships is evident to every interpreter. Controversy continues, however, over two

issues: 1) what did Paul mean by headship in each case; and 2) how closely should the parallels in these relationships be taken?

Much of the reason for disagreement among interpreters arises from the fact that Paul did not explicitly complete these metaphors. He described all three of these relationships by the term **head**: Christ is the head; husbands are heads; God is the head. Yet, he did not explicitly state the roles of the corresponding analogues (men, wives, and Christ). If one member of each pair is the head, what roles do the others play? For the most part, interpreters have sought to answer this question in the same way for all three relationships. As a result, two major interpretations have risen.

First, a number of interpreters have argued that “**head**” in this passage means “source,” as the “head” of a river is the source from which the river flows. In this view, Christ is the source of males in the sense that Christ created Adam from the dust (Gen. 2:7; Col. 1:16; John 1:3). In a similar fashion, males are the source of females in the sense that Eve was taken from Adam (Gen. 2:22). God the Father is the head of Christ because Christ “came from the Father” (John 1:14; 16:27-28).

A couple facts supporting this view deserve mention: 1) ancient Greeks frequently used the term “head” metaphorically to indicate the source from which something came; and 2) in this passage, Paul specifically mentioned that **man did not come from woman, but woman from man** (11:8). “Source” is certainly one of the connotations that Paul expected the Corinthians to understand by his use of the term **head**.

Second, a number of other interpreters have argued that **head** in this passage implies “authority.” In this view, a chain of authority extends from God the Father, to Christ, to husbands, and to their wives. This interpretation gains support primarily from the ways in which the Hebrew term “head” is used in the Old Testament (Num. 17:3; Deut. 20:9; Josh. 11:10; 22:14; 1 Sam. 9:22; 15:17; 1 Chr. 24:31; Isa. 7:8,9; Hab. 3:13,14; but only in Hab. 3:13,14 does the Greek word “head” appear in the Septuagint, and there it clearly refers to the literal head of a body in a metaphor). It is also supported by Paul’s use of “head” in Colossians 2:10, and in Ephesians 5:23 (the only other New Testament passage that uses this type of language with respect to husbands and wives, and to Christ and the church). This is also the meaning behind “head” as a metaphor in Ephesians 1:22 which says of Christ that God “appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body.” In addition, several New Testament authors quoted Psalm 118:22 which uses “head” to mean “main” or “chief” (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:7).

An alternate interpretation to these two popular outlooks suggests that Paul did not complete the metaphors because the parallels among Christ, husbands, and God are not strictly or precisely the same. Recognizing that these analogies could easily be stretched too far by treating the parallels too strictly, Paul himself qualified these metaphors in the next portion of this chapter (11:11-12). Christ, husbands, and God are

all sources and/or authorities in different ways. The term **head** has a variety of connotations, including “source” and “authority.” In some respects the connotations of “source” should be emphasized, and in other respects “authority” appears more clearly in view. According to this reading, Paul purposefully left the meaning of **head** ambiguous because the terms did not have precisely the same connotations in all three metaphors.

In some respects, this variation should be self-evident. Husbands are never the heads of their wives in precisely the same way that Christ is the head of men. After all, Christ created human beings and is the perfect and absolute authority. No man could or should be that for a woman. Nor is Christ the head of men precisely in the same way that God is the head of Christ. The Father did not create the Son, nor is Christ simply the subordinate of the Father. The differences among the various members of these analogies make precise comparisons impossible. It is difficult to imagine any single thread that ties these three metaphors together in precisely the same way.

What then was Paul telling the Corinthians in 11:3? This passage is very clear in some regards, but not in others. On the one hand, it is not self-evident precisely what Paul meant by **head** in this passage. It is one thing to affirm that God ordained headship roles, but quite another to specify what “headship” means in any particular relationship. We must look at other portions of Paul’s writings, as well as at other portions of Scripture, to know how the Father is the head of Christ (Matt. 11:27; Luke 1:32; 10:22; John 3:35; 5:20-27; 8:28; 10:37-38; 13:16-20; Rom. 2:16; 8:17,34; 1 Cor. 3:23; 15:28; 2 Cor. 4:4; 5:19; Eph. 1:17; Phil. 1:11; 2:11; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 1:5), how Christ is head of a man (John 13:16-20; Rom. 9:5; 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 3:23; 8:6; 9:21; 10:16-17; 12:12-27; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 1:22-23; 3:6; 4:11-16; 5:22-33; Col. 1:16-20; 2:19; 3:15) and how husbands are heads of their wives (1 Cor. 7:4; 14:35; Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-19; Tit. 2:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-7). For that matter, we may extend this principle to other relationships as well. Although Paul did not use the specific terminology of headship to describe these relationships, it is appropriate to speak of parents as the heads of their children (1 Cor. 7:14; 2 Cor. 12:14; Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:20-21;), masters’ as the heads of their servants (Matt. 10:24; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22; 4:1; 1 Tim. 3:4,12; 6:1-2; Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18), church leaders as heads of their churches (Acts 14:23; 15:4-6,22; 20:17,28-32; 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10; 1 Thess. 2:6; 1 Tim. 5:17; Jas. 5:14-15; 1 Pet. 5:1-3,5) and government officials as heads of their citizens (Rom. 13:1-7; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). To know more precisely what headship means in these various relationships, we must look beyond the mere term “**head**” and understand the unique features of each relationship.

On the other hand, we must remember that Paul’s chief concern here was not to specify what he meant by headship. He commended the Corinthians for understanding this doctrine (11:2), and apparently felt little need to explain himself. His primary concern was much more practical. In this passage, the headships of Christ, husbands, and God had one thing in common to which he drew attention: each head should be honored. This practical concern comes to the foreground in the repetition of the word

“dishonor” (11:4,5). By their actions in public worship, men are expected to honor Christ (11:4), and wives are expected to honor their husbands (11:5). Of course, Paul realized that 11:3 did not say everything. So, in 11:11-12 he made it clear that wives must also honor Christ as their husbands do, and that husbands must not consider themselves superior to their wives. Nevertheless, he focused here on the principle that all should bring honor to their heads. Christ brings honor and glory to his heavenly Father (15:24), and men and women should imitate his perfect example as they strive to bring honor to their heads as well.

RESPONSIBILITIES TO HEADS (11:4-16)

Because of the nature of creation, honor is due from men to God, and from wives to husbands. In Corinthian society, male head coverings dishonored God, and female head coverings honored husbands. Therefore, wives were to wear head coverings in worship, and men were not to wear head coverings in worship.

11:4. Paul addressed men first, saying that **every man who prays or prophesies while his head is covered dishonors Christ, his head.** Possibly, Paul simply had in mind that men dishonor their own physical heads, but this interpretation seems unlikely from the context. In the Roman Empire, men generally covered their heads with their togas as they performed pagan worship rituals. It is not known for certain that this practice had reached Corinthian pagan worship, but it seems likely that Paul at least warned against adopting this practice in the church.

In a word, for a man to cover his head in the worship of Christ was to worship in the same way pagan men worshiped their gods. Imitating this practice mixed false religion into the worship of Christ, and therefore dishonored him.

An extremely important point to remember at this juncture is that it is not possible that Paul intended this as an *absolute* statement rather than a *culturally* specific one because God himself commanded Aaron the high priest always to wear a turban when ministering, which would have included prophecy and prayer (Exod. 28:2-4,37-39; 29:6). Moreover, throughout church history Christian men have covered their heads in worship for the sake of warmth and decoration, showing through action their position. Paul’s teaching was in response to the particular pagan influence that had come to Corinth, not an absolute statement concerning biblical worship etiquette for men.

11:5-6. Having dealt with men, Paul turned to women, or more specifically to wives. In the first place, he affirmed that sometimes a woman **prays or prophesies** in public worship. The practice of public prayer would certainly include congregational and silent prayer, but Paul did not explicitly limit women to these kinds of prayer. Moreover, prophecy in the New Testament included the expression and explication of God’s word to his people. Although Paul forbade women to serve in the ordained positions of pastor, elder, and teacher (1 Tim. 2:12), he did not restrict women from

more informal forms of speaking the truth of God's word, even in worship. Just as modern churches encourage women to sing the Word of God and to share their insights into Scripture, Paul expected women to do much the same in the church at Corinth.

Nevertheless, Paul insisted that any wife praying or prophesying in public worship should do so with her head covered. If she spoke in worship **with her head uncovered**, then she **dishonor[ed] her head**. Once again, Paul may have had in mind that a woman would bring shame to her own physical head, but this interpretation seems unlikely. He almost certainly meant that she dishonored her husband. Many commentators have suggested that, in the Mediterranean world of Paul's day, it was customary in some circles for women of good repute to wear a veil or head covering in public, and that this practice thereby honored husbands. While this was certainly true in some areas, there is some reason to doubt that this was the case in secular Corinth (see Digging Deeper, section B). It was, however, for reasons not entirely clear, a practice which honored husbands in the church, and which the churches of God universally practiced (11:16).

To convince dissenters of his view, Paul drew a connection between women having their heads uncovered and having their heads shaved. Wives who did not cover their heads in worship brought shame to their husbands **as though their head[s] were shaved**. Here Paul may have referred to the custom in the first century Mediterranean world that having heads shaved in disgrace punished adulterous women. One can only imagine the shame this practice brought to women. If these women were married, it would also have brought much dishonor to their husbands.

Consequently, Paul argued that **if it is a disgrace** to her husband for a woman to have her head shaved, then **she should cover her head** in public worship. In a culture that did not see any shame in women with uncovered heads, this would have been an entirely ineffective argument. Paul probably felt confident arguing this way only because the church's subculture differed from the secular world on this point. (The church's subculture may have been determined by accommodation to churches in other areas in which society did equate women's publicly bare heads with immorality.) In any event, he concluded that, in order to honor her husband in the church, a wife should cover her head when participating in public worship.

11:7a. Paul elaborated on his position by supporting (**for**) his views with Scripture. First, he argued that a man should not imitate a pagan head covering because **he is the image and glory of God**. According to Genesis both Adam and Eve were made in the image of God. "Male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). What then did Paul mean by saying that man is the **image . . . of God** in contrast with woman? Paul certainly did not deny the clear teaching of Genesis that both males and females are the image of God. Probably, he meant that Adam held a special status (**glory**) as God's image because he was created first (see 11:8). God made Adam directly from the dust, but he made Eve from Adam's body. This gave Adam and his

male descendants a unique role on earth that women did not fill (compare 1 Tim. 2:12-13).

This perspective seems even more likely because Paul not only described man as the **image** of God, but also as the **glory of God**. Adam was not designed for his own glory, but for God's. Before making Eve, God placed Adam in the garden of God (Ezek. 28:13) and commissioned him to work the land in his service (Gen. 2:15). In this sense, therefore, the male descendants of Adam have a more direct responsibility to serve God in the fulfillment of his creation mandate. This special role for males does not diminish in the least the responsibilities of females. They too are images of God and render service to him. Even so, males are in the unique position of being the same gender as the one who first stood before God and served him.

Paul argued that the biblical creation story indicates that men should see themselves as servants of God in a very immediate sense. For this reason, they have the serious responsibility to bring honor to God in all things, but especially in worship. If men follow the pagan practice of covering their heads in worship, they do not fulfill this role.

11:7b. Whereas husbands are the **glory of God**, **woman is the glory of man**. Paul did not mean that woman is not the glory of God for all of creation is for the glory of God (Rom 11:36). More likely, he meant that woman is the glory of both man and of God, and not just of God. Determining whether or not wives should wear head coverings was more complicated than it was for men. In fact, this was exactly the point he was in the process of proving: women should wear head coverings, even though men should not.

Paul based his argument on Scripture by noting that God did not make Eve directly from the dust. Instead, she was **the glory of** her husband. Note that Paul did not say that woman is "the image of man." That would make women entirely derivative of men, which is not true. Paul knew that Genesis 1:27 refuted such error, and said as much in 11:11-12. Instead, Paul called women **the glory of** their husbands because this is one of their unique roles in the creation order. According to Genesis 2:18,20, God created Eve to make it possible for the human race to fulfill the task originally given to Adam (Gen. 2:15). For this reason Moses called Eve "a helper suitable for [Adam]" (Gen 2:18). The Hebrew word "helper" does not mean "inferior," but "aid" or "assistant." It can even be used of social superiors. Moreover, the term "suitable for" means "corresponding to" or "the mirror image of." Adam called Eve "woman" because he realized her full humanity. Even so, Eve was the **glory** of Adam in a very special way. With her joining Adam, the human race would become all God had intended it to be, and both she and Adam would receive much honor as a result.

This unique role held by Eve and her married female descendants led Paul to see wives as having a responsibility to bring honor or glory to their husbands. As followers of Christ, all Christians must seek the good of others above their own good (1

Cor. 10:24). The special relationship between wives and husbands merely intensifies this responsibility. To be sure, husbands must seek the good of their wives as well. Paul made this clear elsewhere (Eph. 5:25-33; 1 Tim. 5:8), but in this context he focused on the special responsibility which the creation story reveals wives to have toward their husbands. Because of this responsibility, wives must seek to bring honor to their husbands in public worship.

11:8-9. Paul further supported (**for**) his argument that woman is the glory of man by appealing to another aspect of the creation account. He reminded his readers that **man did not come from woman** and that man **was not created for woman**. He thereby implied that husbands are not the glory of woman. Instead, the **woman came from man** and was created **for man**. Because she was created **from** and **for man**, a wife is to bring glory to her husband.

11:10. At this point in Paul's argument, one may expect him to have concluded that wives ought to cover their heads in public worship. In fact, this is what the majority of the translations suggest, but it may not be not precisely what he said. Paul concluded (**for this reason**) that women **ought to have . . . authority** over their heads.

This passage presents a number of difficulties. Most major translations add to the original text the words "a sign of" or "a symbol of" so that the verse reads "a sign of authority" (NIV), or "a symbol of authority" (NASB, NRSV, NKJV). If this approach is correct, then it probably means that women ought to wear head coverings as symbols that they are under their husbands' authority. Generally, most interpreters prefer this option. Even if this option is correct, we must remember today that head coverings were a culturally specific symbol of man's authority. Modern Christians cannot simply put veils on their wives and believe they have thus fulfilled the intention of Paul's teaching.

It is possible, however, that the major translations have erred by inserting the words "a sign/symbol of." It is more in keeping with Greek to translate the verse "the woman ought to have authority over her head," meaning that women ought to take or exercise authority over their physical heads. This understanding would indicate that Paul wanted women to act responsibly and on their own in the matter of head coverings. This more literal reading is confirmed by the next statement, "**however, woman is not independent of man**" (11:11). This clause appears to qualify an assertion of the women's authority encouraged in 11:10.

Paul also argued that women should have (**a sign of [?]**) **authority** over or on their heads **because of the angels**. The term **angels** appears four times in this epistle (4:9; 6:3; 11:10; 13:1), but its use here is unclear. Two interpretations of this expression are widespread. First, "**angels**" could refer to actual celestial creatures. The New Testament hints that churches have angels who attend to the church and represent the church to God (Rev. 2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7,14). Even individuals may have such angels (Matt. 18:10). If Paul referred to these angels, then he meant that supernatural angels watched the worship in the church at Corinth to make sure that was acceptable.

Women and men should be careful not to transgress proper behavior in worship because of the angels' watchful eyes.

Alternatively, the term **angels** may be translated “messengers,” referring to human messengers (Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24,27; 9:52; Acts 12:15; Jas. 2:25). If this is the correct understanding of this passage, then Paul may have referred to human messengers who reported to him (compare 1:11; 5:1). In this case, Paul warned the Corinthians to remember that their behavior in worship was monitored by people who would report to him, and that he would hold them accountable (compare 4:21).

Paul may also have referred to messengers from other churches. Some of the churches who held to the practice of head coverings for women (11:16) no doubt did so on the basis that their societies required such attire for reputable women. Paul may have been worried that the messengers would be offended, and would carry bad reports about Corinth back to their own churches. These messengers might report that the wives of Corinth did not honor their husbands in worship. This last case might have become an opportunity for stumbling to occur — the Corinthian women might have negatively influenced the behavior of other churches (compare 8:7-13).

10:11-12. Whenever someone makes a statement, the potential exists that the statement will be misunderstood. This was no less true for Paul than it is for modern individuals. Paul's statements about men and women (and other things, compare 2 Pet. 3:16) were easily misunderstood in his day, even as they are today. Thus, having affirmed the responsibilities of husbands and wives to honor their respective heads in worship, he feared his instructions might be taken as a complete statement on the relations of men and women. Therefore, Paul qualified (**however**) what he had said.

His qualification began with the expression **in the Lord**, a phrase he used elsewhere to identify people in the body of Christ (Rom. 16:8,11,12,13; 1 Cor. 4:17; 7:22, 39; Eph. 2:21; 5:8; Phil. 4:2; Col. 3:18). In other words, the qualifications he was about to express should always be remembered by those who serve Christ. Others might make more than they should of Paul's statements in 11:3-10, but those in Christ should understand that Paul did not contradict other scriptural truths.

Without the rest of Christian teaching, some might conclude from the preceding passage that men bear no responsibility to honor their wives in worship. Others might think that wives bear no direct relationship with the Lord. Paul wanted to make clear that such assumptions had no basis in his teaching. In the Christian church men's and women's different roles in worship must be guarded by other considerations.

Paul brought two considerations to the foreground. First, neither husbands nor wives are independent from each other. Paul restated that **woman** (a wife) **is not independent of man** (a husband), a principle evident from 11:3-10. Her authority (11:10) was always meant to complement man's, so she must not think herself autonomous. Next, Paul added the corollary that **man** (a husband) **is not independent**

of woman (a wife). Husbands must not think that their headship implies independence from or superiority over their wives. Their dependence on their wives qualifies their roles as heads.

To support this claim (**for**), Paul referred to the biological interdependence of men and women. To be sure, **woman came from man** (11:8) when Eve was made from Adam's rib (Gen. 2:22), but it is also true that **man is born of woman**. Every male has a mother, and this biological fact mitigates against any man's temptation to think himself free from the obligation to honor women. The principle of honoring mothers (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16) implies that husbands ought to have high regard and honor for their wives.

Second, lest anyone mistake his description of headship in 11:3, Paul made it clear that wives also have a relationship with God by reminding the Corinthians that **everything comes from God**. In other words, the fact that Eve came from Adam's rib does not contradict the fact that God himself fashioned the first woman. Therefore, women have a relationship with God just as men do. They do not depend entirely on the mediation of the males in their lives. Wives worship and honor God directly because "**there is neither . . . male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus**" (Gal. 3:28). Moreover, this common origin implies a commonality of worship, such that the distinctions between the sexes in their worship roles do not imply complete separation. Men and women must both fulfill their proper roles together if worship is to be acceptable (compare 12:20-21).

The apostle paused to give these qualifications because he knew that great harm could come to the church if he were misunderstood. When husbands fail to honor their wives, they fail one of their most basic responsibilities, causing enormous harm to their families. When women perceive autonomy to go hand in hand with authority, they may also cause significant problems (compare 7:2-5). Additionally, when women fail to realize their direct relationships and responsibilities to Christ, they sometimes live for and through their husbands instead of Christ. To be sure, husbands have a headship role, but this role does not eliminate the need for wives to cultivate their own relationships with Christ. In the context of worship, this means that women must seek to honor Christ as much as their husbands do.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS (11:13-16)

At this point, Paul returned explicitly to the issue of head coverings. Here he employed a different strategy. He did not appeal directly to Scripture to support his outlook, but to nature and to the common practices of the church.

11:13. This section begins with an unusual expression: **judge for yourselves**. By these words Paul did not encourage the Corinthians to ignore his instructions. Rather, he meant that they should not blindly obey his directives. There were to think

through the issue. Paul said this because he was convinced that the believers in Corinth had the ability to think properly on this issue (see 11:2). He hoped that they would reason through issues with him and see how he came to his conclusions. In fact, since this was an area in which he knew the church was following his instructions (11:2), he probably expected the majority of his readers to agree with his position. His direction that they **judge** for themselves may have been a rhetorical nudge to get the Corinthians to compare notes with one another. Paul may have wanted this statement to begin a dialogue between the Corinthians so that the majority would influence the dissenters in a positive way.

Paul put the matter to them plainly, asking if it were **proper** for women to pray in public worship with their heads **uncovered**. By stating the question in terms of propriety, Paul avoided speaking directly of sin. Though some improprieties are also sin, the two are not so closely related that one absolutely must refrain from all impropriety (compare Matt. 3:15; Eph. 5:3; 1 Tim. 2:10; Tit. 2:1; Heb. 2:10; 7:26). Paul consciously chose to argue from what was appropriate rather than from what was righteous. He appealed to the Corinthian's own notions. Knowing their worldview, he expected strong agreement with his position.

11:14-15. This portion of Paul's argument is difficult to discern. Clearly he led the Corinthians to the correct answer by posing another question, asking them to consider if it were not true that **the very nature of things** taught his particular view on the matter. The meaning of this question, however, is quite puzzling. Several explanations have been advanced, but none seems adequate.

1. The expression **the very nature of things** may also be translated "nature itself" (NASB, NRSV, NKJV). On this basis, some interpreters have argued that Paul's question was an appeal to creation ordinances. They have assumed either that Paul thought the created order demonstrated that men should have short hair and women long hair, or that he believed that God actually created men with shorter hair than women. Some have suggested (though wrongly, see Digging Deeper) the latter view to have been the opinion of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, and thereby have suspected that this might have been the Corinthians' view.

Given that the Old Testament says nothing about the relative length of hair, however, it is unlikely that Paul endorsed a particular view of hair length at the time of human origins.

Moreover, the Old Testament refers to long hair on men in a positive light on at least two occasions: with regard to the Nazirites (Num. 6:5,18); and in Absalom's description (2 Sam. 14:25-26). The instruction that Nazirites grow long hair as part of their holy separation unto God demonstrates that no sin or shame innately attends long hair on men. Further, the Bible affirms and explains Absalom's handsome appearance and praiseworthiness by describing the vast quantity of his hair. These passages indicate that biblical writers saw long hair on men as praiseworthy, not disgraceful.

2. Some have suggested that “nature” here refers to the natural world as it then existed. The problem with this view is that no parallels for Paul’s point can be found in nature. In the animal kingdom, the males tend to have greater plumage (birds), longer hair (lions), larger horns (deer), etc. When man is considered in his “natural” state, men’s hair grows just as long as women’s. Nature in this sense simply does not provide the type of example needed to support Paul’s argument. Also, Dio Chrysostom (A.D. 40-ca. 120) argued that the natural world suggests that men should grow their hair long, and that long-haired men are not disgraceful because their practice is probably correct on the basis of the natural world (see Digging Deeper).

3. Other commentators point out that “**nature**” may simply mean “the way things are,” or “acceptable practices.” They assert that Paul did not appeal to creation, but to ordinary human experience, to the widespread unquestioned practices and common sense of his day. By this argument, while it may have been wrong and disgraceful in Paul’s culture for men to wear long hair, it would not have been so, nor would it now be so, in cultures having contrary practices. In support of this view, Paul supported his conclusion by appealing to the common practice of the church, not to creation or Scripture (11:16). His point was that the matter of men’s hair length was so widely settled by ordinary human cultural conventions that it seemed common sense to him.

The problem with this view is that it relies on the assumption that Corinthian culture considered long hair on men disgraceful, but this does not appear to have been the case. Both Epictetus and Dio Chrysostom provide examples indicating that long hair on men was not disgraceful, even if it was the norm (see Digging Deeper).

4. Evidence from the ancient world suggests that many who wore long hair were Greek philosophers or pagan clerics. If Paul referred to these men, the precise meaning of “nature” may not be terribly important. The phrase “**does not the very nature of things teach you?**” would serve the primary purpose of asking, “Isn’t it obvious?”

In this case, the disgrace would not be commonly recognized, but perceived only by Christians who stood opposed to both Greek philosophy and pagan religion. It would be disgraceful for Christian men to appear to advocate either pagan religion or anti-Christian philosophy by dressing themselves like the leaders of other religions. This reading interprets Paul’s argument here as parallel to that in 11:4 which appeals to the pagan men’s practice of covering their heads with togas when they sacrificed to their gods. Of the solutions presented here, this one alone is not directly refuted by evidence from Paul’s time, but this absence of refutation does not make it necessarily correct.

In summary, the most that can be said is that Paul expected the Corinthians to recognize that men should have short hair and women long. He also expected them to see that the glory of women’s long hair implied the propriety of women’s head coverings in worship. Because “nature” cannot be identified, this argument does not

help modern audiences determine whether or not wives or women should wear head coverings, or men long hair, except by establishing the basic rules that Christians should not adopt worship practices that dishonor God or husbands, or that compromise the church's witness to the gospel.

11:16. Paul anticipated resistance to his argument, admitting that some may have wanted to be **contentious about this**. The term "**contentious**" means "eager to argue or fight." Contentions could come from **anyone**, that is, from men or women. Yet, Paul sought to settle the matter by appealing to the widespread practice of the church, saying, "**We have no other practice.**" This phrase may also be translated "We have no such custom" (NRSV, NKJV).

Consequently, some interpreters have understood Paul to say that no approved custom of arguing or contention existed in the church. It is better, however, to understand Paul as the NIV suggests. Paul meant that he and other church leaders (**we**), and **the churches of God** had **no other practice** than having women cover their heads in public worship. The widespread practice of the church should have caused dissenters at least to hesitate over their objections.

DIGGING DEEPER

A. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered (11:4)

In the ancient Roman Empire, men traditionally wore their togas over their heads when offering sacrifices. Archaeology has discovered a large statue of Augustus, who ruled from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14, on which "his toga, the draped outer garment of the Roman citizen, is worn over the head, as it was characteristically in a Roman religious sacrifice" (Thompson, Cynthia L. "Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth." *Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 51, no. 2, June, 1988, p. 101). The statue "was displayed prominently in a large civic building at the end of the forum of Roman Corinth, called the Julian Basilica," but was not erected until "several decades after Augustus' death" (Thompson, p. 101). Since it was erected near the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, it seems reasonable to conclude that Paul's readers knew about the practice of men covering their heads with togas when sacrificing to pagan gods. When not sacrificing, the toga normally was worn around the shoulders.

Raising questions about Roman practices, Plutarch asked, "Why is it that when they worship the gods, they cover their heads, but when they meet any of their fellow-men worthy of honour, if they happen to have the toga over the head, they uncover?" (Plutarch. *Moralia*, vol. 4., p. 21 Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936. Aka *Moralia*, The Roman Questions 266c). It also may have been customary for Jewish men to wear a head covering called a *himation* when praying, equivalent to the modern *tallith* (also mentioned in the Talmud) (Hurley, James B. "Did Paul Require Veils or the Silence of Women? A Consideration of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 and 1 Cor. 14:33b-36." *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 35, no. 2, Winter, 1973, pp. 194-195).

B. Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered (11:5)

Many artifacts recovered from the Corinth of Paul's day, including figurines, statues, and coins, present women without veils or head coverings (see photos in Thompson, Cynthia L. "Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth." *Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 51, no. 2, June, 1988, p. 106-111). One may speculate on this basis "that bareheadedness was not a sign of a socially disapproved lifestyle. These women certainly wished to be seen as respectable" (Thompson, p. 112). None of these artifacts, however, shows women engaged in religious activity.

In contrast to this, Dio Chrysostom (A.D. 40-ca. 120), writing to Paul's home town Tarsus (Acts 9:11) shortly after Paul's day, suggested that in public women veiled themselves completely, such that they could not even see. He also claimed this custom extended to a time before Paul. He wrote: "Many of the customs still in force reveal in one way or another the sobriety and severity of deportment of those earlier days," referring to the days when Athenodorus, a contemporary of Augustus and Cicero, was governor of Tarsus. "Among these is the convention regarding feminine attire, a convention which prescribes that women should be so arrayed and should so deport themselves when in the street that nobody could see any part of them, neither of the face nor of the rest of the body, and that they themselves might not see anything off the road." (Dio Chrysostom. *Thirty-third Discourse*, section 48. Cohoon, J.W., and H. Lamar Crosby, trans. Dio Chrysostom, vol. 3., p. 319. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940.) Likewise Plutarch, writing in a work probably published after A.D. 96, suggested that among the Romans it was "more usual for women to go forth in public with their heads covered" (Plutarch. Moralia, vol. 4., p. 27 Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936. Aka *Moralia*, *The Roman Questions* 267a).

It may be that Paul came from a culture (Tarsus) in which dishonor attached to women who did not veil themselves in public, but wrote to a church in culture (Corinth) that did not share this view. While many women may have worn veils in public worship (11:2) according to the custom of the church (11:16), some preferring Corinth's practices may have forgone veils.

C. As though her head were shaved (11:5).

There may have been a custom in the first century Mediterranean world that adulterous women and prostitutes were punished by having their heads shaved in disgrace. For example, Dio Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 40-120) recorded that the Cyprian "Demonassa, a woman gifted in both statesmanship and law-giving . . . gave the people of Cyprus the following three laws: a woman guilty of adultery shall have her hair cut off and be a harlot — her daughter became an adulteress, had her hair cut off according to the law, and practised harlotry," though he did ascribe this to "the days of old," probably indicating a pre-Pauline date (Dio Chrysostom. *Sixty-Fourth Discourse*, sect. 2-3. Dio Chrysostom, vol. 5, p. 47).

Lucian (ca. A.D. 120-200), in a play written for his contemporary audience, wrote of a woman who had left her husband for the company of philosophers as having “her hair closely clipped in the Spartan style, boyish-looking and quite masculine” (Lucian. “The Runaways,” 27. The Works of Lucian, vol. 5, p. 85). She was also reported to have been an adulteress (Lucian. “The Runaways,” 31 [compare 18-19]. The Works of Lucian, vol. 5, p. 93). In keeping with the idea that short hair was “masculine,” in another of his works Lucian wrote of a “married” lesbian couple Megilla and her “wife” Demonassa from Corinth. Megilla, who called herself “Megillus” (a man’s name), removed her wig to reveal “the skin of her head which was shaved quite close, just as on the most energetic of athletes” (Lucian. “Dialogues of the Courtesans,” 291. The Works of Lucian, vol. 7, p. 383). In this same Dialogue, Leaena, a woman who has engaged in lesbian acts with Demonassa and Megilla, claimed regarding the affair, “I’m ashamed, for it’s unnatural (*allokotos*)” (Lucian. “Dialogues of the Courtesans,” 289. The Works of Lucian, vol. 7, p. 381).

Thus, Dio Chrysostom indicated that a woman’s shaved head might indicate adultery and prostitution prior to Paul’s time. Lucian indicated that after Paul’s time it may have been a mark of lesbianism. Lucian also associated short hair with a woman convicted of adultery. Beyond this, the Bible itself seems to indicate that shaving a woman’s head was dishonorable or “humbling” (Deut. 21:12-14), though without reference to adultery or prostitution.

D. A sign of authority (11:10)

The Greek text literally says that a woman ought to have “authority (*exousia*) on/over (*epi*) her head.” The NIV inserts the words “a sign of” because it assumes Paul is speaking about a head covering which represents authority. While *epi* often means “on” or “upon,” the evidence from Greek usage elsewhere in the Bible suggests that *epi* when used after *exousia* refers to the realm in which authority is possessed (i.e. “authority on earth” [Matt. 9:6; 28:18; Luke 5:24]), or to the thing over which authority is possessed (Luke 9:1; 10:19; Rev. 2:26; 6:8; 11:6; 13:7; 14:8; 16:9; 20:6; 22:14). The grammatical evidence suggests that Paul meant that women ought to possess authority over their own heads.

E. Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair (11:14)

The many artifacts (coins, statues, etc.) recovered from ancient Corinth indicate that men typically wore short hair in the Roman Empire during Paul’s day (see photos in Thompson, Cynthia L. “Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth.” Biblical Archaeologist, vol. 51, no. 2, June, 1988, p. 100-103). Plutarch, writing not long after Paul, recorded, “In Greece . . . it is usual for men to have their hair cut and for women to let it grow” (Plutarch. Moralia, vol. 4., p. 27 Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936. A.k.a. Moralia, The Roman Questions 267b). Herodotus’ account is much older, he being born in 484 B.C., and shows a variety of customs: “Ever after this the Argives, who before had worn their hair long by fixed custom, shaved their heads, and made a law, with a curse added thereto, that no

Argive should grow his hair, and no Argive woman should wear gold, till they should recover Thyreae; and the Lacedaemonians made a contrary law, that ever after they should wear their hair long; for till now thy had not so worn it" (Herodotus. Book I, sect. 82. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920. p. 105).

Epictetus, however, whose life probably spanned roughly A.D. 50-120, did not suggest that nature gave men short hair, as has been attributed to him. He wrote: "Come, let us leave the chief works of nature, and consider merely what she does in passing. Can anything be more useless than the hairs on a chin? Well, what then? Has not nature used even these in the most suitable way possible? Has she not by these means distinguished between the male and the female? Does not the nature of each one among us cry aloud forthwith from afar, 'I am a man; on this understanding approach me, on this understanding talk with me; ask no further; behold the signs'? Again, in the case of women, just as nature has mingled in their voice a certain softer note, so likewise she has taken the hair from their chins. Not so, you say; on the contrary the human animal ought to have been left without distinguishing features, and each of us ought to proclaim by word of mouth, 'I am a man.' Nay, but how fair and becoming and dignified the sign is! How much more fair than the cock's comb, how much more magnificent than the lion's mane! Wherefore, we ought to preserve the signs which God has given; we ought not to throw them away; we ought not, so far as in us lies, to confuse the sexes which have been distinguished in this fashion." (Epictetus 1.16.9-14. Page, T.E., ed. Oldfather, W.A., trans. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925.)

Elsewhere, Epictetus defended the honor of philosophers, of which he was one, and described them as wearing "a rough cloak and long hair" (4.8.5). Dio Chrysostom, writing not long after Paul, defended his own long hair, and also tried to dispel an evidently prevalent idea that men with long hair were especially virtuous in some way: "At present quite possibly people suspect that I am one of your wiseacres, one of your know-it-alls, basing their suspicion upon a ludicrous and absurd bit of evidence, namely that I wear my hair long" (Thirty-fifth Discourse, sect. 2. Dio Chrysostom, vol. 3, p. 391). He also mentioned many types of men who wore long hair, indicating that in no case did disgrace attend them. Moreover, he suggested that the natural world of beasts and animals indicated the wisdom of men growing their hair long:

"My remarks are not leveled at all sophists, for there are some who follow that calling honourably and for the good of others . . . I mean rather those whom they appoint to serve you as experts in wisdom, three or four long-haired persons like the high-priests of your local rites. I refer to the 'blessed ones,' who exercise authority over all your priests, whose title represents one of the two continents in its entirety. For these men too owe their 'blessedness to crowns and purple and a throng of long-haired lads bearing frankincense. . . . I still maintain that long hair must not by any means be taken as a mark of virtue. For many human beings wear it long because of some deity; and farmers wear long hair, without ever having even heard the word philosophy; and, by Zeus, most barbarians also wear long hair, some for a

covering and some because they believe it to be becoming. In none of these cases is a man subjected to odium or ridicule. The reason may well be because their practice is correct. For instance, you observe that rabbits, weak creatures that they are, are protected by their shaggy coats, and that among birds even the weakest find their feathers a sufficient protection against wind and rain. But as for human beings, while we shear off our locks . . . and also shave our beards, we make coverings for our heads. . . . And yet what cap of Arcadian or Laconian make could be more suitable than a man's own hair?" (Thirty-fifth Discourse, sect. 10-12. Dio Chrysostom, vol. 3, pp. 401-403).

Elsewhere, reflecting on Homer's praise of men's hair, Dio Chrysostom went so far as to say, "The adornment afforded by the hair, to judge by Homer, seems to be more suited to the men than to the women" (Dio Chrysostom from his "Encomium on Hair," as quoted in Synesuis' Encomium on Baldness. Dio Chrysostom, vol. 5, 341-343). While Dio Chrysostom also admitted that men wearing "a cloak but no tunic, with flowing hair and beard" (Seventy-Second Discourse, sect. 2. Dio Chrysostom, vol. 5, pp. 177-179) were often mocked, insulted and even beaten, he clearly indicated that this was due to the fact they bore the traditional appearance of philosophers, and that those who mistreated them did so because of their prejudice against philosophers, not against men with long hair (the entire Discourse deals with the issue of prejudice against philosophers).

These passages seem to indicate that in Paul's day no stigma or disgrace attached to men with long hair according to culture, religion, philosophy, or even the natural world.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. For what did Paul praise the Corinthians? Does this section of Scripture sound like praise to you? Why or why not?
2. What does it mean to be a "head"? What do the various heads have in common? Why did Paul use this metaphor? Do you think he introduced the metaphor to teach us many things about "headship," or just to make one or two points? Is it safe to draw inferences from this metaphor that Paul did not imply?
3. In what parts of his argument did Paul appeal to culture? In what parts did he appeal to Scripture? How does recognizing these differences help you determine which portions of Paul's teaching are the binding principles and which are the non-binding applications?
4. What roles do women play in your church's public worship? Do they pray? Do they prophesy? Do they hold ordained offices? How do the men and women in

your church feel about the roles women play in public worship?

5. How do wives honor their husbands in your church's public worship? How do husbands honor Christ in your church's public worship? How does your culture perceive your church?

6. How is your culture similar to and/or different from that of Paul's world? Does your church accommodate itself to culture, or does it defy culture? Whether it accommodates culture or defies it, is it justified in doing so? Are there ways in which your church could change in order better to honor God, the church, husbands, and the gospel in its public worship?

7. How are your church's worship practices similar to or different from those of other churches?

8. At the end of this passage, Paul appealed to the practice of the "churches of God" to support his point — is this type of appeal feasible today? Why or why not?

9. Why is the cultural context of this passage so important? If you did not know the cultural context, how would you read this passage? What does this imply about the assumptions we make when we approach Scripture? What does this imply about the questions we ask of Scripture? Does this indicate to you that perhaps you need to reevaluate your understandings of other texts?

10. How does this passage function in Paul's larger argument in this letter? Is it just an isolated bit of teaching, or does it somehow flow from what he said before it, and lead into what he said after it? What indications can you find in the passage to support your conclusions?