

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God, we pray for peace within our homes and our work. Guide our thoughts, our deeds, our words and our emotions, and transform our lives for the better. May everything we think, do and say demonstrate love's victory over the many temptations of the enemy and over every form of evil. We ask this through the name of Jesus, who is the supreme example of love's final conquest of sin and who is with us now through the Holy Spirit. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Write down a list of the people you will meet today, those with whom you will have some form of social contact. Ask the Lord whether there is anything that He would have you say or do for each person, so that you may be a blessing to each one

On-going prayers

- **Pray for countries in turmoil.** *Pray for Zimbabwe, a country still impoverished because of the greed of its leaders, but one that has increasingly become isolated. Pray for good leadership to arise that will make the country great once again.*
- *Over the weekend, London has experienced civil unrest amongst young people. Pray for cities in your own country and ask the Lord to work in power there to overcome Satan's grip on those who have become disaffected from society*
- *Give thanks to God for His grace and favour towards you; name your blessings and give God the glory*

Meditation

Jesus; I would be a sower and a reaper for Your Kingdom.

A sower of compassion amongst those without care;
And a reaper of souls who find love.

A sower of satisfaction amongst those without contentment;
And a reaper of souls who find peace.

A sower of laughter amongst those without happiness;
And a reaper of souls who find joy.

A sower of encouragement amongst those without confidence;
And a reaper of souls who find trust.

A sower of Your Word amongst those without the truth;
And a reaper of souls who find faith.

Jesus, would that others be 'sowers and reapers'.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

² I commend you for remembering all about me, and for keeping the traditions I handed on to you. ³ Now, I want you to recognise that Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ.

⁴ Any man praying or prophesying with something over his head dishonours his head, ⁵ and any woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonours her head, she is like one whose head has been shaved. ⁶ For if a woman does not cover her head, she may as well have her hair cut off; and if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or be shaved, she should cover her head. ⁷ Now a man ought not to have his head covered, being the image and glory of God, but a wife is the glory of a husband.

⁸ Now, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ For this reason and because of the angels, a woman ought to have responsibility for her own head. ¹¹ However in the Lord, neither woman is independent of man nor man independent of woman. ¹² For just as woman came from man, so also man is now born of woman; and all things are from God.

¹³ Judge for yourselves whether it is fitting for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled!

¹⁴ Nature itself does not even teach you about whether it disgraces a man if he wears long hair, ¹⁵ whereas if a woman has long hair, it is her glory; for her hair is given to her as a covering. ¹⁶ But if anyone thinks this is contentious, we have no other custom, and nor do the churches of God.

Review

This extraordinary passage has been argued over for centuries, because it touches on some contentious issues. These are firstly the head-covering of women (11:4-16), and secondly, the subject of 'headship', and the relationship between men and women in general (11:3,8). We must of course deal with these thorny issues, but a careful reading of the passage shows that some of this passage is not what it seems.

To begin with, some of my translation (above) is a little different. This part of 1 Corinthians is indeed difficult to translate and I have spent some time working at it, in order to get it as close to the original Greek as I can. We will find out the consequences of this as the study unfolds. Secondly, and importantly, when Paul writes about head-covering, his starting point is that of '*praying and prophesying*' moreover, both women and men '*pray and prophesy*' (11:5)! What therefore does this phrase mean?

The words, '*praying*' and '*prophesying*' describe what happened normally in worship, as Paul describes later on in Corinthians (ch14). Now in the first century AD it was usual for women to be separated from men in worship, but there is no hint of this here. It seems the Corinthians had begun to break down the barriers of this ancient practice, and Paul says nothing to bring it back. Instead, he offers us a radically new picture of both men and women worshipping together, something that would have been scandalous in those days! Paul therefore gave advice about women's head wear in order to defuse any unfounded allegations, especially sexual, about what went on in worship. It was a new situation; no wonder Paul says that he is unaware of any other custom (11:16)!

To begin with, Paul says that '*Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ*' (11:3). It would be wrong of us to take one part of this allegory, about a man and a woman, merely to make a point about their relationship. Of course, this text is often quoted by those who wish to make a point about male authority. Paul does indeed write that woman comes '*out of*' man, but this simply reflects his biblical view of creation from Genesis 2. He does not say anything here about the role of men or women in marriage or in worship, he makes a different point, that men and women should be united with Christ in the worship of God. Now this makes sense of the entire passage.

Verses 4 to 7 now introduce the subject of head-covering in worship. Now in Paul's day, both Jewish and Greek men covered their heads in worship, but he told Christian men to uncover their heads (11:4)! Women normally wore various forms of headwear, and only prostitutes let their hair down. Flowing hair was regarded as giving sexual signals to men, so Paul told Christians women to retain their headgear in worship. Keeping all this in mind, verses 4 to 7 begin to make more sense, including Paul's wonderful phrase at the end of verse 7 '*a wife is the glory of a husband*'!

Paul now returns to the relationship of men and women. In verses 8 and 9, he reinforces the biblical order of creation, which has women made from a part of man, to be with him as not just a helper but as an equal (Genesis 2:22-25). Then, as if to remind men and women of every generation of their place before God, he says categorically in verse 11, '*neither woman is independent of man nor man independent of woman*'. He also plays down the idea of woman being '*made out of man*' by pointing out the obvious, that '*man is now born of woman*'! Again, the only way to hold everything together here is to understand that all are equal before God.

In the middle of this section we find a verse that has caused much controversy; most Bible versions give a translation something like this '*... a woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head*' (11:10 - see the

NIV). Over the years, people have interpreted this sign as being either a man, or a headscarf. However, we have unfortunately become slaves to a traditional interpretation of this verse, and you will find I have translated it differently. I believe a correct translation is more like this, ‘... *a woman ought to have responsibility for her own head*’. Now this is rather different, but it makes perfect sense in the light of Paul’s desire to present men and women as equals in worship, and interdependent in the marriage relationship (11:11,12).

Finally, Paul begged the church to judge these things for themselves (11:13). The length of people’s hair and whether they wore headgear or not was of no consequence to him, but he did not want woman’s hair to become a stumbling block (11:15)! His one concern is that men and women should worship together unimpeded and that they should not make stumbling blocks that stand in the way of the Gospel.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the text
- The origins of man and woman (and Christ) (11:1-3)
- Paul’s advice about what to wear in ministry (11:4-7)
- Paul’s general comments about men and women (11:8-12)
- Paul’s final appeal (11:13-16)

Notes on the translation of the text

V3 ‘Christ is the head of every man’

There is a play on words within this passage about the meaning of the word ‘head’. In the Greek language, the word for head has three well defined and accepted meanings.

- First, meaning a physical head on a body;
- Secondly, meaning ‘authority’ as in ‘headship’;
- Thirdly, meaning ‘origin’ or the ‘source’ of something.

Here in this sentence, the word ‘head’ is obviously not used in the first sense meaning a physical head (as it is in most of this passage). Neither is the word head used in the second sense, that is, meaning that a man has authority over his wife. This is because from the evidence of ancient texts, especially the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, whenever this idea of male authority is referred to in the Greek language, the word ‘exousia’ is used, not the word ‘kephale’, meaning head. We are left with the enigmatic third sense of the word ‘head’, meaning ‘the source’ or ‘origin’ of something. I have addressed the question of what this means in the study, but we must remember that Paul was clearly using the Greek word ‘head’ in different ways throughout this passage. It is a word play that would have stood out to people of his day, and one we can easily get wrong today!

V5 ‘she is like one whose head has been shaved’

It is likely that the one Greek word for ‘one whose head has been shaved’ refers to a woman who has been punished by her husband for disobedience, probably for having an affair.

V10 ‘a woman ought to have authority over her head.’

The meaning of this in Greek is clear, and most Bible versions are tragically wrong. Traditional translations show a tendency to assume that a woman’s head covering is the responsibility of a man or husband, but it is not. The plain Greek reads exactly as I have written, giving a woman the ‘exousia’, meaning ‘right, authority, liberty’ to deal with her head covering appropriately; it is her responsibility!

V12 ‘man is born of woman’

The Greek has ‘in this way the man through the woman’. Paul is clearly using imagery from Genesis 2 here, and speaks of the creation of a man through the process of birth, through a woman.

V13 ‘Judge for yourselves whether it is ...’

You will find that most Bible translations make this a question, and say ‘Judge for yourselves; is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?’ However, this is not necessarily a question, because there are no clear indications of a question in the Greek sentence. Frankly, the meaning is plain when you translate the text in a straightforward way.

V16 ‘we have no other custom ...’

The Greek here is difficult, and could appear to say 'we have no such custom' (NRSV) which is quite different. The Greek word for 'other' means 'of such kind, similar or like', and so the sentence indicates that no 'similar' custom exists, hence my translation. As with the whole of this passage, the ambiguities created by the Greek text contribute to a very difficult passage.

There are a large number of intricate issues involved with this analysis, and the deeper study will look at each part of the text in turn; Paul's basic understanding of the origins of man and woman (and Christ) (11:1-3), his advice about what to wear in ministry (11:4-7), his general comments about men and women (11:8-12), and his final appeal (11:13-16). I strongly urge you to read through the rest of this study. In view of the issues involved and the misunderstandings about the text, it is vital that God's people seek the truth about these things.

The origins of man and woman (and Christ) (11:1-3)

At the end of the last chapter, Paul calls on the Corinthians to ensure that their mission to the world is not compromised by their attitudes and behaviour. He asks the Corinthians to copy him, but only insofar as he imitates Christ (11:1); then in a parallel sentence (11:2), he commends the Corinthians, but only insofar as they maintain the traditional teaching he has 'handed on' to them. Paul now goes on to speak about the role of women and men in church ministry. We must be clear, verses 4 and 5 describe men and women in the worship together, and in complete equality. The idea that this passage adds to some Biblical evidence for a prohibition of women's ministry is wide of the mark.

In Paul's day, women were considered by men as a lesser creation than man, both within Judaism but far more in the pagan Roman world. The pagan myths of the Greek and Roman world suggested that women were made as lesser beings to men, as servants and child-bearers, but not as equals. To counter this and any tendency within Judaism to misinterpret their own scriptures, Paul sets out the divine plan of creation (11:3), using a wordplay on 'head' which serves his purpose to introduce what he was going to say next about headgear. But unfortunately, this has led to untold misunderstanding in subsequent generations who have misunderstood the wordplay. I have explained most of this in the notes above, but not explained that in the Roman world, the idea of the head as being the 'source' of something was far more common than today. For example, water fountains with water coming from the mouths of sculptured 'heads' became common in Greek and Roman architecture, and we still find such use today in garden water-features! Paul drew on the common idea of his day that if you want to understand something, then you should 'go to the head', meaning the 'source'.

If you now put these ideas together with Genesis 2:21-25 and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (in which Christ is God, not a creation of God) then you can only conclude the following. When Paul said 'man is the head of woman', he was talking about Adam and Eve together as the representatives and progenitors of all humanity, and saying that they were as much a unity in each other as Christ was with God. The idea that a woman is somehow subject to man because of what Paul says here is again, wide of the mark, for by the same argument, one should say that Christ was subject to God; an idea that is certainly not Christian theology! Christ is God, and any suggestion that he is 'subject' within the godhead would have been regarded as heresy, at least in the early church. Paul's point is that in Christ, man and woman are united as God's unique creation, indeed, they worship God together, just as Christ and God are 'one' (John 17).

Paul's advice about what to wear in ministry (11:4-7)

I have explained in the introduction the cultural norms of the day for head wear, and the general meaning of this next section of our text. It remains for us to emphasise that Paul apparently envisaged men 'praying and prophesying' (11:4) and women 'praying and prophesying' (11:5) together, with no distinction. Indeed, he took this for granted! Certainly, what men and women wore on their heads was different, for the reasons I have already explained, but in ministry, they were one! The activity of 'praying' was the priestly ministry of intercession, which brought to God the affairs of humanity, and the activity of 'prophesying' was the communication of the word of God to His people. Together, the activity of the priest and the prophet summarised what Paul meant by ministry. Therefore, contrary to what people believe about this passage, it seems to advocate equality in ministry between men and women, not the opposite!

In verse 6, Paul shows his concern for women; he is not dismissive. When saying 'for if a woman does not cover her head, she may as well have her hair cut off', he expresses a concern that outsiders might misinterpret the absence of a head covering as some kind of sexual signal, and be scandalised. The situation may have arisen because at Corinth, the call was 'be free to do what you want', and as a result, we may imagine that some women removed their headwear like the men, and consequently raised some eyebrows! However, Paul used the same principle as in the previous chapter 'all things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial' (10:23), and pointed out that the removal of headgear would not have helped the church in its mission. Hence, his recommendation that the headwear be retained (11:6).

In addition, Paul explained that the removal of headwear for men indicated the open and free relationship they had with God through Christ (in contrast to Jews and pagans, who did not have such a relationship). Further, this was shared with women; and Paul's comment 'and also woman is the glory of man' (11:7) suggests he reckoned that even if women had to wear headwear for cultural reasons, this did not matter because their access to God was shared equally with men.

Paul's general comments about men and women (11:8-12)

Verse 8 has often been quoted as evidence that Paul believed women were subordinate to men. This is certainly the standard 'Jewish' view of men and women, but I ask you to read the text carefully, because if we want to know what Paul was trying to say, we must read the whole paragraph, and not the verse alone. Verse 8 is just Paul's starting place in his making of a point that is actually made in verse 10, where Paul says unequivocally that a woman should have the 'authority' to do what she wants with her head! Please note that this is the only place (and I stress, the only place), where 'authority' is mentioned in the whole of this passage, and this authority belonged to women concerning what they should place on their heads! He gave this freedom because there was indeed no general practice in the church. The situation was new and developing, and Paul appears to give the Corinthians freedom to develop their own policy, given his guidelines. Let me stress this; Paul's desire is that women should be free from social restraints concerning what men thought about their hair, and be able to decide for themselves whether they wore headwear or not. This conclusion is essential, and when understood like this, applies to all women in the church today.

However, although a woman has this freedom, what women do affects men because of their close connection in the worship of God (11:7,8). Paul explains that women should exercise caution with their liberty to either wear headwear or not, and consider how their actions might affect men. Paul regrets the fact that men were sexually tempted by the sight of women's hair (as was true of those days), but 'in the Lord' (11:11), women and men were thoroughly interconnected and could not be separated. This is a further reminder from Paul that liberty to do something in Christ does not necessarily mean that it is wise or helpful for the building up of the church. Indeed, we can see today that in the world, when women dress in such a manner as to ignore the fact that what they wear is sexually enticing to men, they can create unnecessary social difficulty, and ultimately, misunderstanding of themselves and their motives.

The only way for men and women to behave should be to realise that what one does affects the other, both individually and socially, and that the secure source of right relationships between men and women is in God, who treats them as equals (11:11,12). Incidentally, the mysterious reference to angels in verse 10 probably refers to the fact that Paul believed that men and women would judge angels together at the end of the world (1 Cor 6:3), and for them to do that they had to be in godly partnership, and free. The mention of angels is nothing to do with them being sexually tempted by women, as some have suggested!

Paul's final appeal (11:13-16)

Unfortunately, you will find that verses 13 and 14 are quite different in most Bible versions. Some think that these verses suggest that 'by nature', men's hair should be short, leading to a conclusion (11:15) that women's hair should be long! However, I suggest that we should not stray too far from reading these verses as Paul's open appeal to the Corinthians to examine what he has said and work out for themselves whether he is right or wrong. He was confident that they would reach the same conclusions as he. The wearing of headwear for women was a matter of social convention, but it was certainly not necessary from any theological point of view. Again, despite social convention, Paul was happy to say that a woman's hair is her 'glory' (11:15), it is not a sex object but simply what covers her head (11:15). In saying this, Paul spoke far ahead of his time; indeed, he spoke prophetically of a time when women would be free from the tyranny of male oppression!

Finally, to cap all this, Paul challenges those to whom he wrote to say that if anyone thinks what he teaches contentious, then he or she should be careful because the whole church accepts this 'custom'. By this, I believe he means that basic Christian belief is the equality of men and women before God.

Discipleship

Application

The implications of this study are clear, and I have outlined them as I have written. There is no doubt that Paul believed that Adam was made first and Eve was made out of a rib from his side, but there is precious

little evidence in scripture, if any, that he believed that this meant that men should exercise some kind of 'rights' or authority over women. Clearly, there are other texts which speak about similar issues, in particular 1 Timothy 2:11,12, but I ask you to read what I have written about this text (and others, for example Ephesians 5:22) to discover that just like this passage, Paul's concern for women has often been misunderstood as prejudice against them in the life of the church. The conclusions of this passage do not merely counter the idea that women should not minister in church; they assume that they do! They do not only suggest that the wearing of headwear by women is a cultural sensibility to prevent men from misunderstanding their sexual motives, they prophesy the time when women will be free to wear what they please!

Many well-meaning Christian men have been led down a path of believing that scripture gives them a prior authority over women. Some practice this without shame and forbid women from engaging in church ministry in a quite awful manner. Others attempt to be more understanding, seeking to accept women in all areas of church life and ministry, whilst maintaining the concept of an authoritarian 'headship', perhaps within marriage, or even written into the principles of church life and management. Many churches suggest a separation of men's and women's ministry to deal with the problem. Unfortunately, such an approach has two major drawbacks. Firstly, however kindly it is put, the separation of men and women's ministry has no scriptural precedent, indeed, unless one is profoundly selective, virtually every scriptural description of ministry in the New Testament assumes the equality of men and women. The equality of men and women before God is fundamental to the Gospel, as Paul says (e.g. Gal 3:28), and as Jesus says (Matt 19:4, Mark 10:6). Secondly, most of the well-meaning analysis of scripture is dependent on translations of the Bible that are clearly disposed to allowing the notion that men have some kind of authority over women, as we have seen so graphically in this study.

It concerns me that people can read scripture (the NIV in particular), and conclude from what they have read that men have some degree of authority over women. The reality is that this is a reflection of the theological assumptions of the group of scholars who translated the passage, combined with a traditional understanding of scripture dating from days when it was acceptable for men to regard women as 'kept in their place' (as in the Authorised Version). We can only ask that God make His word clear by His Spirit, despite the limitations of His people, and our occasional misunderstanding of His Word.

Questions for groups

1. Do you believe that men have any form of authority over women in God's created order of the world? What are the implications of this for the life of the church?
2. Read through this passage and discuss in your group any part of it that concerns you or which you do not understand. Keep yourself open and sensitive to others as he discussed these issues.
3. How can women be enabled to escape the domination of men in the life of those churches where unnecessary domination is exercised? What other forms of domination blight the life of the church?

Discipleship challenges

- *If you are concerned about this study, then spend time in prayer, asking the Lord to help you evaluate what you believe and what this study says. God alone knows all truth.*
- *If you feel liberated by this study, then pray for those who have different opinions to you about the relationship of men and women in God's order of things. Pray about this and seek the Lord's will about what should be done to correct injustices.*

Final Prayer

Almighty Lord, help us to be sensitive to other people, and to seek to understand both men and women, young and old, and people of every walk of life. We are naturally limited, but with the help of your Holy Spirit, we seek to override all human limitations and, in our own generation, show the supremely generous love of Jesus Christ to all. Guide us as we seek to follow You, Amen
