

Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

UNIT 1: The Creation Mandate		UNIT 3: New Testament Women in Public Leadership	
The Crown of Creation	Gen. 1:26-31	Anna	Luke 2:22, 36-40
The First Human, Almost	Gen. 2:1-17	Woman at the Well	John 4:1-42
The Human Race Completed	Gen. 2:18-25	Jesus' Women Associates	Luke 8:1-3; 23:55—24:11; John 20:1-2, 11-18
Broken Fellowship	Gen. 3:1-13	Lydia	Acts 16:11-15, 40
Facing the Consequences	Gen. 3:14-24	Priscilla	Acts 18:1-3, 18, 24-26; Rom. 16:3-4; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19
UNIT 2: Old Testament Women in Public Leadership		Paul's Women Associates	Rom. 16:1-16; Phil. 4:2-3; Col. 4:15
Miriam	Exod. 2:1-10; 15:19-21; Num. 12:1-16; 20:1; Mic. 6:4	UNIT 4: Difficult Passages in the New Testament	
Deborah	Judg. 4:1-10, 14; 5:1-3	The Creation Order Understood	1 Cor. 11:2-16
Huldah	2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron. 34:22-28	Keeping Order in Public Worship	1 Cor. 14:26-36
Esther	Esther 2:5-11, 16-23; 4:13—5:8; 7:1—8:6; 9:29-32	Mutual Submission among Christians	Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Pet. 3:1-7
Jehosheba	2 Kings 11:1-21; 2 Chron. 22:10-12	I Suffer Not a Woman	1 Tim. 2:8-15
		The New Testament Understanding of Women	Gal. 3:23-29

Credits and Notices

Session Authors

Exposition:	Rev. Kaza I. H. Fraley, Pastor, Church of the Nazarene, Mulvane, Kansas
Study Guide:	Revs. Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson, Co-pastors, Drexel Victory Family Fellowship Church of the Nazarene, Drexel, Missouri
Commentary:	Dr. Wayne McCown, Dean and Professor of Bible and Ministry, Northeastern Seminary, Rochester, New York

Editors:

Rev. Sarah B. C. Derck, Kansas City, Missouri
 Dr. Joseph E. Coleson, Professor of Old Testament, Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri

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The Creation Order Understood—Exposition

Scripture Focus

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Exposition by Kaza Fraley

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Who is the Head?

I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you. ³But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. ⁴Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, ⁵but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. ⁶For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil. (vv. 2-6¹)

This passage is fraught with opportunities to misunderstand what Paul was saying to the people in the church at Corinth. The first thing that can be easily misunderstood has to do with the word “head” found in verses 3 and 4. Most people today automatically think in terms of the head of a company, someone in charge of or leading others, but that is not what is meant here in this passage. If so, Paul would be saying Christ is the boss of a man and a man is the boss of his wife. This is not what Paul meant in using this word. The problem with understanding this word as boss or leader becomes evident when Paul says God is the head of Christ (v. 3). God is not in charge of or the leader of Christ. Christ is not submissive to God. That belief was considered heresy by the early church.

The word “head” as Paul used it in this passage means “source.” He was speaking of a head or source, as in the head or source of a river, the place from which the river originates. If we understand “head” in this way, our understanding of these five verses falls into place. Christ is the source of man, in that man (all humanity for that matter) ultimately finds his source in Christ and His resurrection. Man is the source of woman, as seen in the Creation narrative when woman was created out of the side of the man. God is the source of Christ in that Christ shares the same substance with God, as the Church has believed down through the ages.

From here, Paul began to discuss the place of head coverings in the worship setting. Men were to pray and prophesy with their heads uncovered. This is a familiar idea for modern American readers—in American culture it is considered proper for men to remove their hats for prayer. However, a man removing his head covering for acts of worship was not common practice in Roman culture in Paul’s time. We know this by looking at carvings and statues found in Corinth and dated to this time, which portray men with their togas pulled up over their heads at sacrifices and while worshipping idols. For men to worship with uncovered heads, as Paul directed them to do in this chapter, thus was a way of shunning the practices of idol worship found in the world around them.

Paul then spoke to the women about covering their heads while they prayed and

prophesied. Artifacts found in Corinth, and dated to about Paul's time, portray women as Paul instructed, with their long hair covered. Writings of the time also instructed women to wear a devotional head covering when worshipping. Certain women in the pagan temples would not wear their hair covered; instead these temple women would wear their hair loose and uncovered, designating themselves as temple prostitutes (in many of the pagan cults in Corinth, intercourse with a temple prostitute was a common way to worship the pagan god). Paul wanted there to be no mistake about the honor of Christian women or what their role in worship was, so he instructed the women to pray and prophesy with their heads covered so no one could possibly get the wrong idea about them.

It is also important to note that in Paul's culture, it was considered very unfeminine and disgraceful for a woman to cut her hair short or to shave it. Women simply did not do that—it would have been embarrassing and shameful. No woman would have cut her hair off willingly. Paul said it was just as disgraceful for a woman to pray and prophesy with her head uncovered as it would have been if she had cut it off. For the women of the church to be mistaken for women of loose morals would have been dishonorable and shameful.

Reflection and Image of God

For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. ⁸Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man.

⁹Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man.

¹⁰For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. ¹²For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God. (vv. 7-12)

Paul argued here that men are the image and reflection of God and women are the reflection of men. This does not put women in a lesser position than men in relation to God—verse 12 does not allow that interpretation. Paul in fact was saying that since woman is the reflection of man, who is the image and reflection of God, she is *also* the reflection and image of God. She is a reflection of both, and

therefore also is made in the image of God. Nowhere in this passage does Paul say women

are not made in the image of God.

Paul told women they are to have a symbol of authority on their heads. Nothing up to this point in the passage has put women in a submissive role to men, and the authority here is not ascribed to men. In fact, since men are not mentioned in relation to this authority at all, we cannot conclude that the veil is a symbol of men's authority over women, but instead must understand it to be a symbol of her own authority. "For this reason" refers grammatically not to the "man" of verse 9, but to the phrase "because of the angels," a phrase whose meaning is obscure at best to today's readers. "Nevertheless" is our clue here—even though a woman has a symbol of her own

We need each other and depend on each other for the most important thing—life—and neither gender role is more important than the other.

authority on her head, she should not consider herself independent of all men, which might lead to a bitter, man-hating existence.

Women in Roman culture were not allowed to speak publicly—it would brand one who did as loose and dishonorable. But Christian women were allowed to get up and pray and prophesy publicly in worship. Just as the loose hair of the women in the pagan temple told everyone who and what they were, Paul wanted the head coverings of Christian women to symbolize the authority they held to pray and prophesy in the worship setting. The head covering not only maintained the modesty and virtue of the wearer, but proclaimed that modest Christian women had the same authority as the men to pray and prophesy in public.

Paul's discussion then moves to the interdependence the two genders have upon each other. Woman came from man, as the Genesis narrative states, and of course, no woman is born without the participation of a man. Men come through women, in that every man is born out of a woman. We need each other and depend on each other for the most important thing—life—and neither gender role is more important than the other. The most important thing to remember is that God is ultimately the source of all. We look to God as our creator and ultimate source of being.

Paul's Conclusion

Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? ¹⁴Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a

covering. ¹⁶But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God. (vv. 13-16)

As Paul brought this discussion to a conclusion he spoke of the issue from the standpoint of nature—his first-century A.D. perspective of nature. People in that day believed it was unnatural for a woman to have short hair, and unnatural for a man to have long hair. The only men known to wear their hair long were homosexuals and barbarians (people who lived outside the boundaries of the “civilized” Roman Empire). Men within the Roman Empire who wore their hair long, often did so to be effeminate and intentionally to designate themselves as homosexuals. Thus, Paul concluded it was unnatural for men to wear their hair long, and definitely not something Christian men should do.

Conclusions

In this passage Paul told the Corinthians that Christian men were not to cover their heads while praying and prophesying, as the pagans did when they worshipped, nor were they to grow their hair long and be mistaken for homosexuals or barbarians. To appear in either of these ways would have dishonored God, by associating themselves with pagan cults or with persons who behaved in ungodly ways. Because they were the image and reflection of God, they would have been dishonoring God in the way they were reflected God's image to the world.

In the same manner women were told to present themselves in an honorable fashion when they prayed and prophesied. They were to cover their heads. To worship in any other way might have caused confusion and had them mistaken as women of dishonor and ill repute. This also would have reflected poorly on God. Both women and men were supposed to behave in a manner which would be seen as honorable to their society.

In the same way, Christians today should not act in ways that would be unseemly in the greater culture. We should dress modestly and behave in ways that will not scandalize the individual, the Church, and God himself. As individual Christians and as a community, we need to be aware of how we conduct ourselves in worship, as well as in the greater society, so we do not disgrace ourselves or our God in the process. This passage is not as much about heads, as it is about honoring or

dishonoring the community of God, as well as the source of that community, God.

We also can see from this passage how God intended men and women to relate to each other. One sex is not to be raised above the other and exercise authority over the other. Women and men are not to see themselves as separate or as enemies trying to gain their rights from or over each other. We need each other for our very existence, as well as needing each other to be in relationship with Christ. We are one in the Lord, not only as regarding individual pairs of husband and wife—for all are not married (in fact Paul saw singleness as preferable)—but all of humanity, all males and all females, are one in the Lord, together in a community called the Church, which is the body of Christ, in whom that community finds its source.

Notes

¹ All Scripture quotations in the Exposition section are from the NRSV.

The Creation Order Understood —Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson
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Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. According to the Commentary section, what Roman, Hebrew, and Greek cultural “rules” are at play in this passage?
2. How does Paul address them?

3. Why are these issues important to our interpretation of the passage? How does considering these culture-specific issues inform our reading of the text?
4. A large part of Paul's letters to the church in Corinth has to do with the public worship of the local church, and this passage is no exception. In this passage, what roles do men and women play in worship? Does Paul assign these roles along gender lines?
5. Paul is not addressing the "what" of worship as much as he is addressing the "how" of worship in the Corinthian context. Why is that distinction important? In what ways does the "how" of worship vary from culture to culture?
6. In our time and culture, most of the considerations Paul addresses are *not* at play. What value does this passage have for our lives today?
7. How do some within the church use this passage to exercise authority over women?
8. How is that usage essentially a misreading of the text?

The Creation Order Understood —Commentary

Commentary by Wayne McCown
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Introduction

Most Christians simply disregard this passage. Because it addresses an ancient social custom, it is regarded as no longer relevant. Those who do study it seriously disagree on its interpretation. Understandably so, as the text is fraught with difficulties. Part of the dilemma is that we know too little about the Corinthian situation. Moreover, Paul's argument is difficult to follow. Some of his key terms are open to differing interpretations. Thus, not all questions raised by this passage can be answered, at least not dogmatically. But some essential points concerning the role of women in the church are very clear.

I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you. (v. 2¹)

All commentators agree this verse introduces a new section in this letter. In chapters 11-14 Paul addressed matters of decorum in worship: (1) proper dress for women in ministry (11:3-16); (2) proper conduct at the Lord's Supper (11:17-34); (3) proper exercise of the spiritual gifts (chs. 12-14).

The last-named topic is clearly introduced in 12:1 with the formula, "Now concerning spiritual gifts." This same formula is used multiple times in 1 Corinthians following 7:1, where Paul says, "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote." The same formula

("Now concerning") is used to introduce new topics at 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1.

It appears the Apostle was addressing in this letter, for the most part, questions sent to him by the Corinthian church. Here in chapter 11, he attached to their question regarding spiritual gifts a couple of other points of personal concern about decorum in worship. As noted in this introductory verse (11:2), he based his appeal on the teaching he had delivered to them, and the traditional practice among Christian churches (see 11:16). It seems the Corinthian church was inclined to write its own rules and "do its own thing" (see 14:36). Paul called them to a broader consideration of the issues involved in these matters of proper decorum in worship.

But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. ⁴Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, ⁵but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. ⁶For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil. ⁷For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. ⁸Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the

sake of man. ¹⁰For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. (vv. 3-9)

Paul's essential point here easily can be lost in the argument. Proper decorum in worship called for a woman who prayed or prophesied to have her head covered, and a man to have his head uncovered. Why? To do otherwise was "disgraceful."

Apparently, in the first century, women who conducted themselves with modesty wore a headdress in public. "Loose" women did not. This seems to have been the traditional practice among Jews, Greeks, and Romans. On the other hand, there is some evidence that in the pagan mystery cults, women worshipped with uncovered heads. Paul did not want Christian women to be perceived as "loose," or Christian worship to be likened to a pagan cult. Therefore, he advocated for Christian women—and men—to dress for worship in accord with accepted conventions.

This is consistent with Paul's approach elsewhere to such "social" issues as eating food that may have been offered to idols, the observance of particular days as "holy," and circumcision (cf. Timothy, Acts 16:1-2). He did not want matters of personal behavior to become the cause of offense, and detract from the gospel of Christ.

It is clear in this passage that Paul treated women as full partners with men in Christian worship and ministry. But he insisted that, for both women and men, such activities as praying and prophesying must be carried out with proper decorum.

The Apostle's *point* is clear; his *argument* is not. A great deal of controversy and uncertainty surrounds his use of "head," the

appeal to Creation (Genesis), the reference to "angels," and the description of the veil as a "symbol of authority."

Some commentators interpret "head" hierarchically. They use it to support their view of universal male domination over the female sex, supposedly as God's created order. Others have found the translation of "fountainhead" or "source" more in keeping with Paul's argument. "Head" is so used elsewhere in Greek literature.

On either interpretation, an over-emphasis on hierarchy is not supported by the context. Christ *may* be subordinate to God as His "head" (11:3), but He is not inferior. Orthodox theology insists Christ is God's equal (see Phil. 2:6).

Though woman comes from man, so man comes from woman (11:12). Thus, woman is not dependent on man as the subordinate sex, or an inferior being. Rather, men and women are equals before God and mutually interdependent (11:11).

Verses 11-12 interpret and qualify the appeal to Genesis in verses 7-9. Paul did not say only man is made in the "image of God" and woman is not. What he said is woman is also the "reflection" of man as well as of God. One author concludes the female, thus, is a fuller representation of humanity than the male, and better qualified to represent humanity before God.² Perhaps.

In an incidental comment, Paul referred to "angels" in verse 10. This further complicates our interpretation of his argument. Some scholars believe Paul was arguing the woman's head covering serves as a protective shield from evil, sexually predatory angels. Other commentators point to such texts as Psalm 148

and Revelation 5, as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls, where angels are evoked as participants in the worship of God. On this interpretation, which is much simpler, angels—as well as men—are present to witness the decorum of women in worship and ministry.

Finally, what is the significance of the head covering vis-à-vis “authority” (v. 10)? Some who hold to a hierarchical interpretation of this passage regard it as a sign of woman’s subordination to man. However, that is to turn on its head the Greek term used here. Throughout Greek literature, this term consistently refers to power and authority, never to subordination. It is found in such New Testament texts as John 1:12, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave *power* to become children of God” (cf. John 5:27; 17:2; 19:10-11; Acts 1:7; 8:19; 9:14).

Interestingly, earlier in this letter, Paul used the same term extensively in teaching the proper exercise of our liberty or “rights” in Christ. The Greek term underlies the words italicized in the following texts:

- ❖ 8:9, “But take care that this *liberty* of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”
- ❖ 9:4-6, “Do we not have the *right* to our food and drink? Do we not have the *right* to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no *right* to refrain from working for a living?”
- ❖ 9:12, “If others share this *rightful claim* on you, do not we still more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this *right*, but we endure anything rather than put an

obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.”

- ❖ 9:18, “What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my *rights* in the gospel.”

In Paul’s usage, the term “authority” conveys with it certain “rights,” and the exercise of “liberty.” Thus, with strong support from the broader context, we may conclude that women have liberty and authority (i.e., “the right”) to function as ministers in Christian worship. However, the Apostle insisted that in so doing—and this is his primary point—they must meet one condition: modesty in dress.

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. ¹²For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God. (vv. 11-12)

In these verses, Paul speaks more straightforwardly. His point comes through loud and clear: men and women are equals before God, and mutually interdependent.

The Greek term underlying “nevertheless” suggests to many commentators, including myself, that the Apostle here was qualifying his earlier arguments (vv. 3-10). He included these two declarations to guard against possible misinterpretation (over-interpretation?) of his previous comments on Genesis.

“In the Lord” means in the Christian church, among those who belong to Christ, both women and men.

The declarations here are consistent with Galatians 3:27-28: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves

with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? ¹⁴Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God. (vv. 13-16)

These arguments are secondary and support his main points. Some commentators think they reflect Paul's awareness that his previous arguments may not have "carried the day" with the Corinthians. Indeed, even after all is said and done, his last comment (v. 16) suggests his awareness that some in the Corinthian church still may "be contentious."

In verses 13-15, the Apostle appealed to his readers' own power of discernment. Again, at the outset, the primary point he was arguing in this passage stands clear: "Is it proper for a woman to pray with her head unveiled [or, better, "uncovered"]?" The larger context supports a broadening of the question, as follows: Is there such a thing as proper—and improper—dress (for both women and men) in worship and ministry?

Paul invited his readers to consider what "nature" teaches concerning the differences between men and women. This was a common appeal in the first century.

Contrary to some, Paul was not arguing that long hair represents a woman's "covering," or that a woman should not have her hair cut short. Rather, his implied point is

an analogy between what "nature" teaches and what he teaches: Men ought not to have a covering on their head in worship; women should. In the implied analogy, the term "glory" in verse 15 parallels the use of the term "authority" (or, "symbol of authority") in verse 10. The Apostle attributed both "authority" and "glory" to women, without qualification, except for the matter of modesty and propriety in dress.

In his final sentence on the matter (v. 16), Paul appealed to "custom." This serves as a bookend to the appeal in his opening statement (v. 3) to "the traditions." The Apostle expected the Corinthians—even if they had a different opinion on the matter personally—to conform their behavior to that of "the churches of God." They were not free simply to write their own rules, or "do their own thing."

Assuming his authority as an Apostle, Paul stated he did not intend to argue further with those who simply wanted to "be contentious." He had made his point, and argued the case. Later in 14:37, he would state more strongly than here, "Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord."

Conclusion

Paul's concern in this passage is that women who are participants in the ministry of the church be properly attired. Per the social convention of the first century (and the custom in other Christian churches), the Apostle did not believe it proper that women should pray and prophesy with heads uncovered. In a parallel argument, he stated that a corollary principle holds for men. They too should be

appropriately dressed when they pray and prophesy. No distinction whatsoever is drawn between the two sexes as participants and ministers in the church. However, a clear distinction is drawn between them regarding the attire that is appropriate and inappropriate for each in worship.

Thus, the Apostle treated men and women as equals, yet maintained a clear distinction between women and men. Women are “from God” (v. 12) and “in the Lord” (v. 11), just as much as men are. Spiritually, in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:27-28).

“Nevertheless” (v. 11), though equal in Christ, not every physical difference between them disappears. Both have their origin in God and bear His image, and in that image were created male and female. That sexual distinction should be respected, and not blurred.

In arguing his case for propriety in worship on the part of both men and women, Paul employed a variety of appeals: 1) “the traditions” he had delivered to them via teaching; 2) the analogy of the relationship between Christ and God; 3) the order of Creation (Genesis); 4) the teaching of “nature” concerning what is seemly and unseemly; 5) the “custom” among Christian churches.

The appeal to custom is not a frivolous one. Though social conventions change from age to age, and differ from culture to culture, throughout history Christian believers have tried to avoid bringing offense to the gospel of Christ because of their personal behaviors. Thus, the Church has always taught that men and women of faith should reflect the

principles of propriety and modesty in their choice of dress (see 1 Pet. 3:3-4).

Both women and men are equals before God and mutually interdependent. Moreover, women are full participants in the Christian church. In this passage, the Apostle assumed throughout and specifically declared women’s “right” and authority to function as ministers in Christian worship. However, the Apostle insisted they meet one condition: modesty in dress. This principle applies equally to men.

Notes

¹ All Scripture quotations in the Exposition section are from the NRSV.

² Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 141-2.

For Further Reading

Bilezikian, Gilbert. *Beyond Sex Roles*. Third Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.

Witherington, Ben, III. *Women in the Earliest Churches*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.