

| 1 Corinthians |

Week 18 Scripture Guide | 1 Corinthians 11:2-16¹

Biblical Context

First Corinthians 11 opens the section regarding issues in corporate worship (Head Coverings, the Lord's Supper, Spiritual Gifts).² It is important to remember that reading Paul's letters is quite literally "reading someone else's mail." As such, each issue that is addressed by Paul finds its original audience with the first century church in Corinth and should first be read with this in mind. As with much of Scripture, there are many aspects of cultural background that are taken for granted by the original author and audience and it is important to have a grasp of this original context to understand what is being written and how it would have been read. Only then can we distill the enduring principles of a passage.³ While many contemporary churches make attempt to take passages like these *literally* they are not necessarily reading the passage *literarily*, i.e. taking into account historical background, socio-religious considerations, as well as considering the perspective of both author and audience. We must therefore distinguish between customs and principles. As modern students of scripture, we are tasked with understanding the ancient context, cultural backdrop, and issue being addressed. From this perspective we must not offer a critique of the culture or its custom, but rather observe and take note. Additionally, we do not need to appropriate first century Greco-Roman Corinthian culture to understand principles of scripture.⁴ In this passage, understanding the socio-religious cultural background is important. Also important to note is how Paul's use of the word "head" was literal, metaphoric, or symbolic in that culture.

To understand this passage, we must unpack a few cultural customs that were understood in first century Greco-Roman culture. Roman culture was a pagan culture (worshipped a pantheon of gods, idols, etc.). "Roman men sometimes practiced the custom of pulling the loose folds of their toga over their head as an act of piety in the worship of pagan gods. Paul thus draws on the example of this pagan custom (which everyone in the Corinthian church would have thought absurd) to make the point that men should not dishonor Christ by praying according to pagan custom (8:4)."⁵ Common in Paul's world were statues of emperors with their heads covered showing the 'correct' masculine ritual behavior. His teaching that it would be shameful for a man to cover his head while worshipping would have been not merely odd but also "politically scandalous." "Piety, expressed by men covering their heads in ritual, is also a visual identification with 'faithful images of the emperor.'"⁶ Thus for a man to cover his head in worship would evoke a "clear association...with pagan devotion."⁷ Additionally, head covering, like thick hair, was used as a gender marker. A man with long hair in that culture might have been associated with being overtly effeminate.⁸ A woman's head covering was a sign of marriage and a married woman who uncovered her head in public would have brought shame to her husband. This may have also "connoted sexual availability or may simply have been a sign of being unmarried."⁹ Thus, the context of this passage has to do with husbands and wives. Forcing a husband to expose his wife's beauty publicly was "scandalous, even

¹ Why are we starting in 1 Cor 11:2 and not 11:1? While chapter and verse divisions can be helpful, they are not original, and were not added until the 16th century. The phrase in 1 Cor 11:1 contextually fits with the subject matter of 10:23-33. Paul says he was "not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me as I am of Christ (who also did not seek his own advantage, but that of many, they may be saved)" (10:33-11:1). When we take all chapter and verse divisions as divinely inspired, we can arrive at different conclusions than the author originally intended.

² Paul is writing what is at least the second letter to the Corinthian church (cf. 1 Cor 5:9) and has been addressing issues that the Corinthians have brought up in their letter to him (1 Cor 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12) and also those reported to Paul by word of mouth (1:11; 11:18).

³ Additionally is the aspect of literary devices and style of writing and the role it plays in the message. Paul here utilizes a word play that holds both literal meaning and figurative significance.

⁴ A very important aspect of rightly interpreting Scripture is knowing the difference between "descriptive" and "prescriptive." Paul is giving instruction to first century Corinthian Christians, but is describing the cultural context. We are not instructed to appropriate these cultural practices in modern times, though principles can transcend time.

⁵ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2207.

⁶ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 513.

⁷ Ciampa, 513.

⁸ Long hair on men was associated with homosexuality in the Roman world. Ciampa, 512. Deuteronomy 22:5 contains instruction that men were to identify as men and women to identify as women. While the verbiage pertains to clothing, the substance has to do with outward identification with a God-given gender. Long hair on men and short hair on women, in that culture, was similar.

⁹ "In cultures where women's head coverings are not a sign of being married, wives do not need to cover their heads in worship." Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2207. "Greek women typically let down their hair for worship (see Schüssler Fiorenza, 227)." Craig S. Keener, "Head Coverings," *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 444.

immoral.”¹⁰ Roman culture associated public appearances of women (especially with heads uncovered) with “sexual license and revolt against their husbands.”¹¹ Thus, a woman with an uncovered head, in that culture, was implying either sexual promiscuity or defiance against her husband, and a distraction to men in the context of worship.¹² A man with his head covered during worship and a woman (i.e. a wife in particular) with head uncovered during worship portrayed a particular message in that culture. This understanding is necessary. Paul’s presentation would have been seen as a rather subversive view of things for “good Roman citizens,” where it was understood that authority ultimately passed from “the gods to the Roman emperor and from him down through the ranks to the lowest in society.”¹³

Paul first opens with a commendation (ἐπαινέω, *epaineō*) for the ways the church has maintained many of the traditions he delivered to them (11:2). He writes that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God (1 Cor 11:3).¹⁴ The term “head” (*kephale*) is used in the literal sense to refer to the top of a person’s body, but also used metaphorically or symbolically to denote *authority*.¹⁵ To “dishonor one’s head” was to bring dishonor on the one in authority over them, and was ultimately to dishonor God. The Roman-Corinthian citizens would have understood this. With this understanding, the context of the passage comes more in view. In light of the pagan custom of men covering their heads in pious worship of the gods, it was a dishonor to Christ for a man to perform this custom in worship, praying or prophesying. Of another ancient pagan culture, God commands his people, “take care that you be not ensnared to follow them...and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods?—that I might do the same’” (Deut 12:30). Because man was made in the image of God, he is not to have his head covered. A wife with her head covered symbolized that she submitted to her husband’s authority. In light of the cultural (non-religious) practice of wives covering their heads, it would be a dishonor to the wife’s husband should she present herself publicly in corporate worship and not show the appropriate degree of relational alignment to her husband, but rather an overt revolt.¹⁶ Paul uses a debate technique referred to as *reductio ad absurdum*, reducing an opponent’s position to its natural but absurd conclusion. In that culture, it was “natural” for a woman’s hair to be long and for a man’s hair to be short.¹⁷ With hyperbolic speech, he says, “If a wife will not cover her head (in a revolt against her husband), then she might as well just cut all of her hair off” (1 Cor 11:6a, paraphrase). Of course, Paul knows that the cultural norm is that it is “disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head” (11:6b). Likewise, a man ought neither cover his head like the pagans do when they worship, because he is “the image and glory of God” (11:7).¹⁸ Therefore, in that culture, the wife “ought to have a symbol of authority on her head” in the appropriate context (11:10a).¹⁹ Nevertheless, properly ordered and aligned believers were unhindered in the exercise of prayer and prophesying in the context of corporate worship and are on equal standing (11:11).

¹⁰ Keener, 443.

¹¹ Keener, 443.

¹² In Numbers 5:11-29, among other things, the adulterous woman is identified by having her hair unbound by the priest (Num 5:18). “In some areas women who go about uncovered are considered common sexual property, and a girl who is not covered might be deemed promiscuous and hence forfeit the possibility of marriage.” Craig S. Keener, “Head Coverings,” *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 445.

¹³ Ciampa, 507.

¹⁴ An excellent passage to read in tandem would be Eph 5:22-32. In this passage, Paul uses similar verbiage. The husband is “head” (authority) of the wife even as Christ is the “head” (authority) of the church. The wife willingly submits to the husband’s loving and sacrificial authority. This appears to go against the grain of current societal norms. This does not promote weak wives or tyrannical husbands, but rather Christ-centered and other-oriented marriage.

¹⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 1 Cor 11:3–4. Some suggest that “head” means not authority, but “source.” “But in over 50 examples of the expression “person A is the head of person(s) B” found in ancient Greek literature, person A has authority over person(s) B in every case.” Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2206.

¹⁶ It is very important not to read our current culture into ancient culture. Furthermore, a wife’s biblical submission to her husband is perfectly balanced by the husband’s sacrificial love, as Christ loves the church (Eph 5:22).

¹⁷ Paul is speaking in general terms not giving voice to the many caveats present even in his day.

¹⁸ Paul is not disregarding the connection of females to the image of God (cf. Gen 1:27; Gal 3:28). Paul lays out the biblical precedent that woman was made from man (Gen 2:21-23), though he will later state that though woman came from man, man is now born of woman.

¹⁹ One reason Paul gives is “because of the angels (or messengers)” (1 Cor 11:10b). This verse in particular is full of exegetical difficulties which are too numerous to go in depth, here, unfortunately.