



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 11:2-16

Topic

The apostle Paul discusses the wearing or not wearing of veils in the public worship service and what it communicates about our relationship with God

Title

“What We Have Here is a Veil-ure to Communicate”

Introduction

First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama wore a black dress and a black veil when she met the pope back in July.

So did Jackie Kennedy, Nancy Reagan, Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush wear veils when they had meetings with a pope. The proper veil for meeting the pope is in the style of a *mantilla*, a lace or silk scarf worn over the head and shoulders and sometimes held in place by a large tortoiseshell-colored comb.

The first ladies of most nations wear a mantilla when meeting a pope. One notable exception was Raisa Gorbachev, who created quite a stir by showing up unveiled and in a red dress.

There. Now you are ready to meet a pope should the occasion ever arise!

First Corinthians 11:2-16

“What We Have Here is a Veil-ure to Communicate”

Traditions and customs exist in certain cultures and circumstances whether we agree with them or not. Not observing them makes a statement and can cause contention.

The apostle Paul spoke of traditions and customs and contentions in the church at Corinth:

- In verse two he reminded the Corinthians that he had established certain “traditions” in the church.
- In verse sixteen he mentioned “custom[s]” and “contentions.”

It’s apparent in these verses that some of the believers were not observing the customs of their culture and it was causing contention.

Customs and cultures change. We need a principle or principles to guide us in every circumstance. Paul gives us just that in these verses, telling us to keep our head.

Because the principle is so important, as we study the chapter I’m going to follow it through these verses then return to discuss the particular application to practices in Corinth.

I’ll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Keep Your Head When You Articulate Your Worldview, and #2 Keep Your Head When You Participate In Worship.

#1 Keep Your Head When You Articulate Your Worldview (v2-3; 8-9; 11-12)

This section of Scripture is one of the most difficult to nail down in all of the Word of God. Commentators are all over the place trying to figure-out exactly what was going on in Corinth and exactly what all the terms mean. Thus it’s hard to be dogmatic about the particulars.

It’s not, however, hard to be dogmatic about the overall teaching of this section. It is about God’s established order in the home and in the church.

First Corinthians 11:2-16
“What We Have Here is a Veil-ure to Communicate”

Whatever customs exist in whatever culture you find yourself, you are to conduct yourself according to the Christian worldview presented here.

Bear in mind the apostle Paul had just established an important life-guiding principle. It's at the end of chapter ten where he said,

1 Corinthians 10:32 Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God,

1 Corinthians 10:33 just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.

In chapter eleven Paul takes up a new subject - how to conduct yourself in the public worship of the church. It is governed by this principle of not giving offense in order to benefit and build-up others.

With that in mind you are ready to adopt certain cultural traditions, if necessary, so as to not offend others and cause contention. When we visited Japan in the eighties it was super-important we wear coats and ties. (I wish someone had told me to bring my own house slippers, too).

With this big-picture view, let's try to sort-out some of what was going on in Corinth.

1 Corinthians 11:2 Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.

Paul offered a quick word of encouragement. Even though they were blowing it in so many areas, he could find reasons to encourage them.

He mentioned they were “keep[ing] the traditions” he had “delivered” to them. The word for “traditions” means something like *order*. Paul had established the church at Corinth and had given its worship services a certain order.

In these verses he's going to talk about participation during those services and about making sure things are done decently and orderly within the traditions he established.

Where did Paul get his ideas of tradition and order from? He told them in verse three.

1 Corinthians 11:3 But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

This is an incredibly important statement. It shouts to us that there is a proper order to things in God's creation and that we must maintain it.

Start with the phrase, "the head of Christ is God." We understand God as revealed in the inspired Word of God to be a trinity, a tri-unity, of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. There is one God Who exists eternally in three Persons. They are co-equal.

Yet for the purpose of achieving the redemption of the human race God the Son, Jesus Christ, voluntarily subordinated Himself to God the Father. We're not told it here but elsewhere we learn that likewise God the Holy Spirit subordinated Himself to Father and Son as He is sent by the Father to reveal the Son.

God the Father is the "head," He exercises authority, over God the Son. The voluntary subordination of the Son speaks volumes to us about the nature of our God.

There is also a proper order among human beings. Jesus Christ is the "head" of every man. Each Christian man is to be in voluntary subordination to Jesus.

Where does that put women? It leaves them in voluntary subordination to their husbands. In the church, when we participate in worship, it puts them in voluntary subordination to men.

Everything else Paul said in this chapter reflects God's order. Everything we say or do in the public worship should reflect God's order. If it is a beautiful thing that Jesus subordinated Himself to the Father, then when we subordinate ourselves to God's order it is also a beautiful thing.

Drop down to verses eight and nine.

1 Corinthians 11:8 For man is not from woman, but woman from man.

1 Corinthians 11:9 Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man.

These verses are a simple summary of God's creation of man and woman in the Garden of Eden. He created Adam first, from dust; then Eve second, from Adam. Though equal to him in every way, Eve was to be subordinate in terms of how things would function in the world. This was God's proper order even before sin entered the Garden.

Drop to verses eleven and twelve.

1 Corinthians 11:11 Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 11:12 For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God.

God's order is not meant to subjugate women. Men and women together in mutual interdependence, complementing each other, bring glory to God. Neither should be independent or think themselves superior to the other. Woman's subordination does not mean inferiority. Man is not superior to woman. Eve came from Adam, and each man born in the world comes from a woman's womb. God created them both for each other.

Equal yet, for the purposes of living-out life on earth to the glory of God, the man is the head, he has the leadership, over the woman.

Before we move on let me say this. One of the reasons ladies sometimes exert their leadership over men is because men are not stepping-up and fulfilling their role. You're the leader so lead! Set the spiritual tone in your relationship with your wife and in your family and in your church. Love your wife the way Jesus expects and empowers you.

I guess what I'm saying is that often behind the overbearing wife is an under-leading husband. Humble yourself and be like Jesus.

Your basic, fundamental worldview is that there is a proper order to the family and to the church set down by God from the very first. Thus in any culture you should follow the customs in such a way that you do not overthrow God's order. You are to example His order so as to show His beauty and love.

Paul applied that principle in Corinth.

#2 Keep Your Head When You Participate In Worship

(v4-7; 10; 13-16)

It gets rough from here on. By that I mean there is no agreement among commentators about exactly what was going on in Corinth and exactly what all the terms mean.

Here is what we can say for sure. Some of the believers in Corinth were acting in ways that were not customary for men and women in that culture and were causing contention. Whatever the particulars, Paul's intention was to have them keep the customs in order to not offend other believers or be an obstacle to the salvation of nonbelievers.

1 Corinthians 11:4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head.

The description, "head covered," seems crucial to our understanding. The words themselves can be translated, *having down from the head*. It seems to be describing men wearing a lengthy veil of some sort.

I think there might be a clue in Second Corinthians chapter three. There you read a lengthy passage in which Paul refers to Moses in the Old Testament putting a veil over his face after he would come down from meeting with God.

Could it be that certain men in Corinth actually adopted that practice, thinking it was the proper attire for "praying and prophesying?"

Could be. In that case the man “dishonors his head,” who is Jesus Christ, by the example he is giving that there is a barrier between God and man.

Or it could be simply that veils were worn by women, not men, and by wearing some sort of veil a man was blurring the symbolism that a man is the head of a woman as Jesus is the head of a man.

What about the ladies?

1 Corinthians 11:5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved.

1 Corinthians 11:6 For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered.

Note in passing that women were expected to participate in public worship. They could both pray and prophesy.

In most cultures it is not customary for women to voluntarily shave their heads bald. Paul uses that as an extreme example to say that the practice in Corinth of women participating in public worship with their “head[s] uncovered” was an extremely uncultural practice.

It wasn't simply against culture. Paul said it communicated to others that the woman with “her head uncovered dishonor[ed] her head,” meaning her husband or, if unmarried, Jesus. In other words, it was a public display of her lack of subordination to God's order. She was out of order.

We see that clearly in verse seven.

1 Corinthians 11:7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.

It is our privilege to bring “glory” to God. When we maintain the Christian worldview, we bring glory to God. When men act like Christian men ought to, and when women act like Christian women ought to, then God gets the glory.

Or you could put it this way: We are always giving others an example of what it means to know God. If others are going to imitate me, then I must imitate Jesus. Jesus, although fully God, voluntarily subordinated Himself to His Father in order to serve and save mankind. Any imitation of Jesus must follow God's revealed order!

Look at verse ten:

1 Corinthians 11:10 For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Hold off on what, exactly, the "symbol of authority on her head" means. We'll tackle that in a moment.

What does any of this have to do with "angels?" Here is one thing that makes sense in the context of order and authority. We know that one-third of the created angels followed Lucifer in his rebellion against God. The Bible describes them as wanting to be as God. Lucifer, at least, did not want to remain subordinate to God so he rebelled and led others into rebellion.

When a woman in any culture adopts practices or jettisons practices that speak of throwing-off biblical authority, she is acting like those "angels" who rebelled against God.

Let's try to get more definitive about what was happening in Corinth. Drop down to verse thirteen.

1 Corinthians 11:13 Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

Paul appealed to their common sense. They should have known that it was not "proper for a woman" to participate in the public worship service of the church "with her head uncovered." It was a no-brainer.

1 Corinthians 11:14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?

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1 Corinthians 11:15 But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering.

I see this as a key to unlocking what was actually occurring in Corinth. It had something to do with a woman's long hair being her covering.

Hold that thought for a moment. First, what in the world was Paul talking about regarding the men and long hair?

Well, he wasn't talking about long hair in and of itself. We know that for several reasons:

1. For one thing, long hair in the Bible was not something that brought dishonor to men. Lots of Old Testament guys had long hair.
2. For another thing, Paul himself once took a Nazarite vow in which he agreed to, for a period of time, not cut his hair!

What Paul must mean, by virtue of elimination, is a particular kind or style of long hair. He means that men should not style their hair like women. He was talking about Little Richard hair!

I'd expand this to say that in whatever culture you find yourself, men should not dress or style themselves to look like women. It ruins the example they are to set of God's proper order and authority. It hinders folks from seeing Jesus.

That is, I believe, what Paul meant when he said, "Does not even nature itself teach you..." He meant that there is a natural order to God's creation. In our hearts we know that God has made us male and female, that there are significant differences, and that they are obviously good and for the maintenance of our species.

This would carry over into any discussion of human sexuality. Homosexual relationships cannot, by definition, bring glory to God because they distort and destroy the natural order God has established.

How was a woman's long hair her covering? And how were the ladies participating in worship uncovered?

The actual, archaeological, sociological, record that exists from first century Corinth is that the ladies wore their long hair pinned-up. They may or may not, in certain settings, have worn veils over their heads. Usually they did at religious functions. That was the cultural norm.

Let me read a passage from one researcher:

The practice of women letting their hair flow loose and uncovered was associated with ecstatic rituals in a number of non-Christian religious communities. For example, when worshiping Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, women let the hair down like the mythic Maenads. Maenads (or Bacchae) were female worshipers of Dionysus depicted in myth as madwomen. (The English word "maniac" has roots similar to "Maenad" in Latin and Greek).

Corinth was a major center for Isis; possibly some of the women prophets of the church had once worshiped her. Certainly they were familiar with this religion, which was popular, especially among women. "Archeological evidence also shows that female devotees of Isis usually wore long hair 'with a band around the forehead and curls falling on the shoulder,' while male initiates had their hair shaven." Isis was said to have made women's power equal to men's. When the women prophets in the Corinth wore their hair down it may have symbolized to them equality of status with the male prophets.¹

Interesting. In chapter fourteen we will learn that certain women were causing problems in the public worship service and we will learn that among the disorderly things occurring were ecstatic utterances in tongues that were too many and too mystical.

It seems to me that Corinthian women wore pinned-up hair and maybe a veil over it. The Christian women chose to go without veils but, further, to pull out the pins and let their hair flow while they were praying and prophesying.

- Worshipping without wearing a veil was uncharacteristic for the culture.
- Worshipping with unpinned hair was borrowing from cultic worship.

¹ <http://gbgm-umc.org/UMW/corinthians/hairstyles.stm>

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That, I believe, was the problem in Corinth.

1 Corinthians 11:16 But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

None of the churches Paul had established, or that he was aware of, had adopted these new “customs” of men wearing veils or women without them unpinning their hair. Those who wanted to insist on their right to worship in that manner were being “contentious.”

In Corinth, men wearing veils or women without them unpinning their hair was a symbol of insubordination that dishonored God. It wasn't some new freedom or liberty available to them. Not yet, anyway. Instead they ought to think of others, of leading them to the Lord.

What about us? It depends on whether the custom of head covering and hair is understood to be a cultural practice or a Christian principle.

I see it as a cultural practice. The principle being taught is to be subordinate to your head - whether it be as a man to Jesus or as a woman to men. You take the principle and apply it in any and every culture in ways that do not cause contention but that invite others to see the beauty of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Act like Christian men and women who are subordinate to Jesus Christ and to one another in the proper, biblical order for the home and the church.