



# CHARIS-MATTERS

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STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 11:2-16

Topic

The practice of wearing, or not wearing, head coverings like veils in the public worship service communicates something 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.

First ladies Jackie Kennedy, Nancy Reagan, Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush wore veils when they had meetings with a pope. The first ladies of most nations wear a veil when meeting a pope. One notable exception was Raisa Gorbachev, who created quite a stir by showing up unveiled and in a red dress.

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.

There. *Now you are ready to meet a pope when one visits Riverdale!*

First Corinthians 11:2-16

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

Traditions and customs exist in certain cultures and circumstances. 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 different 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 )

Commentators are all over the place trying to figure-out exactly what was going on in Corinth and exactly what all the terms mean. It’s therefore hard to be dogmatic about the particulars.

It’s not, however, hard to be dogmatic about the central teaching of this section. It is that God has established an order in the home and in the church. 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 the subject of how to conduct yourself in the public worship of the church. It is governed by this principle of not giving offense in order that you might benefit and build-up others.

Since ministering the Gospel to others is your goal 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 only wish someone had told me to bring my own house slippers, too).

Let's look at the big-picture, Christian worldview.

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.

Even though they were blowing it in so many areas, he could find reasons to encourage 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.

Where did Paul get his idea of proper 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 if we are to reveal the Lord to others.

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 equally God.

However, for the purpose of achieving the plan of salvation for the human race, God the Son, Jesus Christ, voluntarily subordinated Himself to God the Father. Elsewhere we learn that likewise God the Holy Spirit subordinated Himself to both 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. In essence they are equal but for your sake, so that you might be saved, they have adopted different functions. There is a proper order to things.

There is also supposed to be 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 and to church leaders. The man is not superior to the woman; in Jesus Christ we are equal. However, to function according to God's plan for the family and for the church, the man has been assigned as the "head" of the woman.

**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.**

Drop down to verses eight and nine.

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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.

God 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.

Eve came from Adam, and each man born in the world comes from a woman's womb. God created them both for each other. God's order is not meant to subjugate women. Men and women together in mutual interdependence, complementing each other, bring glory to God.

Equal yet, for the purposes of living-out life on earth to reveal the glory of God, the man is the head, he has the leadership, over the woman, both at home and in the church.

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 creation. Thus in any culture you should follow the customs in such a way that you do not dishonor God's order. You are to example His order so as to show His beauty and love.

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What if Jesus, in His earthly ministry, even one time acted independently of His Father? It would totally change our understanding of the nature and character of God! So, too, when we mess with God's order for the family or the church. It fails to communicate the true servant-nature of our Lord.

By the way: You could apply this to a couple of contemporary contentions:

- Women serving as pastors and elders does not reflect God's established order for His church.
- Homosexuality and same-sex marriage do not reflect God's order for the family.

Paul applied the principle in Corinth to problems in their worship service.

## #2 Keep Your Head When You Participate In Worship (v4-7; 10; 13-16)

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 their behavior was causing contention. 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.

Did men wear veils? 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.

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.

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. The practice in Corinth of women participating in public worship with their “head[s] uncovered” was an extreme practice.

It wasn't simply against culture. 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, and when women act like Christian women, then God gets the glory.

We are *always* giving others an example of what it means to know God. Jesus, although fully God, voluntarily subordinated Himself to His Father in order to serve and save mankind. **I must follow Jesus' example of 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.

What does any of this have to do with “angels?” We know that one-third of the created angels followed Lucifer in his rebellion against God. Lucifer did not want to remain subordinate to God so he rebelled and led others into rebellion. He challenged God's established order.

When a woman in any culture adopts practices or rejects practices that symbolize 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?

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. We'll see why in a moment.

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

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 two 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 meant 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.

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

The archaeological and sociological record that exists from first century Corinth is that the ladies wore their long hair pinned-up. In certain settings they also wore veils over their heads. Usually they did at religious functions. That was the religious cultural norm. Hair pinned-up and veiled.

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... “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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

Corinthian women wore pinned-up hair and maybe a veil in church. Certain women chose to go without veils and, 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 characteristic of cults.

I believe that to be the “contention” 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 going 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. Instead they ought to think of others, of leading them to the Lord.

What about us? Should women wear some sort of head-covering as a symbol of authority?

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

First Corinthians 11:2-16

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

Your answer depends on whether you understand the custom of head covering and hair 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 your husband or to the male leaders in the church.

Your behavior and attitudes are a better symbol of authority than anything you might wear!

You can take this principle and apply it in any and every culture. Act and dress, if necessary, 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.