

WHAT IS HEADSHIP?

by Ray C. Stedman

Chapter eleven of First Corinthians has become a great battlefield of the 20th century. It is a very complex chapter that deals with the question, "Are Women Fully Human? or Are They Only Humans, j.g. (Junior Grade)?" This passage will deal with the question of male headship and female subjection, and other issues of today. It used to be that the focus of the chapter was on the question, "Should Women Wear Hats in Church?" but looking over this congregation, I can see that is a long past issue. It has now become a question, not so much of women wearing hats in church, but of whether they are going to wear the pants at home! We shall face these issues that are a part of the swirl of controversy that has escalated into the Feminist Movement of our day.

The apostle introduces this with these words in Chapter 11, Verse 2:

I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you. {1 Cor 11:2 RSV}

Not all traditions are bad. We have seen in this letter that Christianity includes not only the revelation of what Paul calls "the mysteries of God," those great, marvelous, insightful unfoldings of truth about humanity, and about life, that are undiscoverable by the natural mind, but it also includes, as this passage makes clear, certain important and essential traditions, i.e., practices that have been handed down from generation to generation. In Chapter 11 there are two traditions the apostle looks at, the tradition of male headship which dates from the creation of mankind itself, from the earliest dawn of human history, and the second one is the tradition of the Lord's Supper dating from the beginning of the church, as it was instituted in the Upper Room.

In Verse 3 the apostle declares the great tradition of headship as a principle to govern the people of God for all time. Then in the following verses (4-16), he clarifies the practice of this principle under the conditions that were obtaining in Corinth and the world of the 1st century. Here is the principle:

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. {1 Cor 11:3 RSV}

When the apostle uses the word *head* here he is using the ordinary word for the hairy knob that sits on top of the neck, which contains the brain, and the eyes, ears, nose and mouth, and which, even in the ancient world, was understood to be the control center of the body. There are some today who would argue that the ancients did not understand that, but I think it is obvious they did, because four of our five senses are centered in the head. They well knew that to remove the head from the body ended the life and activity of that body. Thus Herodias, the wife of Herod, ordered the head of John the Baptist brought to her on a platter because she knew that would slow John down to a point where she could handle him.

Now when *head* is used metaphorically, figuratively, as it is here, it refers to priority in function. That is what the head of our body does; it runs the body; it is in charge; it is the direction setter of the body. Used metaphorically, therefore, the word *head* means primarily leadership, and thus it is used in this passage. This is clear, I think, from the threefold use of it that the apostle makes here. The one in controversy is the second one, "the head of the woman is her husband," but he brackets this with two other examples of headship so that we might understand from them what the middle one means.

The first one is, "the head of every man is Christ." There is the declaration of Christ's right to lead the whole human race. He is the leader of the race in the mind and thinking of God, and ultimately, as Scripture tells us, there will come a day when all humanity, without exception, shall bow the knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord {cf, Rom 14:11, Phil 2:11}. So whether men know it or not, Christ is their head, and they are responsible to follow him. That is the whole objective of life for any man who wishes to fulfill his manhood.

Of course, that is only seen in practice in the believer, and then only to a limited degree, but it is stated very positively here.

In the book of Hebrews it says that Christ is "the pioneer of our salvation" {Heb 5:9, 12:2}, the one who goes before; the one who opens the way. This is the sense here of this metaphorical use of the word *head*. Christ is the leader of the race, the determiner of every man's destiny, the One to be followed.

Now move down to the third level of headship mentioned here, "the head of Christ is God." Here we have a manifestation of headship demonstrated for us in history. Jesus, the Son of God, equal to the Father in his deity, nevertheless, when he assumes humanity, submits himself to the leadership of the Father. Everywhere Jesus went he stated this. "I do always those things which please my Father." On one occasion he said, "My meat is to do my Father's will, and to please him who sent me," {cf, John 4:34}. On another occasion he said, "I and my Father are one" {John 10:30}, i.e., we work together. He adds on still another occasion, "My Father is greater than I," {John 14:28}. That does not challenge the equality of the members of the Godhead, but when Christ became man he voluntarily consented to take a lower position than the Father. It is in that sense he says, "My Father is greater than I."

Those two headships help us to understand the meaning of the central one, "the head of the woman is the man." The RSV says, "the head of the woman is her husband" but that is interpretation. The word used is *aner*, the male. Though the subsequent passage has in view a married woman, this general statement of the principle of headship has in view men and women in the way they function in society. But it must be remembered that headship never means domination. It is a voluntary commitment, carried out in practice out of a conviction that God's will is best achieved by this means.

It is to be most visible in marriage where it manifests that role of support which a woman undertakes voluntarily when she marries a man. He is to be leader and she assumes a support role to help him fulfill the objectives of their life together as Christ, his head, makes clear. Now if she does not want to do that she is perfectly free not to undertake that role. No woman should get married if she does not want to. This is a role that she is perfectly free to forego if she chooses. If she wants to give herself to the pursuit of a career for her own objectives, she has every right to do so. But then she ought not to get married, because marriage means that she desires to help advance the objectives and goals of her husband. He becomes, therefore, the leader of the two.

Now that is the principle of headship, and the apostle has stated it as clearly and as objectively as it can be stated. It does not involve the idea of origin so much as it does direction. This is the way headship is used in other parts of the Scripture as well. In Ephesians we are told that Christ is the head of the church which is his body, by which it means he is its leader and has the right to set the ultimate direction of the relationship.

In Verse 4 and on the apostle applies this principle to the practice of the church, especially as it was lived within the Eastern culture of that 1st century world. So he says in Verse 4:

Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her head -- it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her wear a veil. {1 Cor 11:4-6 RSV}

Two things are very important to notice in that paragraph:

One: The center of Paul's concern is the public ministry of the Word of God. He is talking here about Christians, about the church, the gathering of believers together in a public assembly. In order to properly function in that capacity, a woman should wear a veil, but a man should not.

That is the second thing to note. The veil comes in as the symbol of the acceptance and understanding of the principle of headship which he has just declared. Where public ministry is involved it is just as important that man should not be covered as that a woman should. That was the application of headship in the culture and

custom of that day and time.

It is significant to note that both men and women were free to exercise ministry. Both could pray and prophesy. As we have seen from other passages of Scripture, and will come to see most clearly in the fourteenth chapter, prophesying is what today we call preaching. It is expounding the Word of God, taking the Scriptures and making them shine and illuminate life. Either a woman or a man could do that, but it was very important how they did it. That is the emphasis this passage makes. They must do it in two different ways, the male as a man, the woman as a woman. That is the central emphasis of this text.

If the man does not pray or prophesy as a man should in that culture then he dishonors his head. It is very remarkable that Paul would say that a man, ministering in public, should not have anything on his head, for the practice among the Jews was for men to wear a head covering when they ministered. In this neighborhood we often see Jewish people walking around, and the men will have the yarmulke (a beanie, we would call it) on their head. It is the prescribed covering for the head, and no orthodox male Jew would ever think of reading the Scripture or ministering in public without it. But Paul the Apostle, raised in Judaism, says that if a Christian man does that he is dishonoring Christ, his head.

On the other hand, if a woman does not have a covering (in this 1st century Christian setting) she dishonors her head, her husband. The reason for that was dramatically obvious in Corinth. In this city, the most licentious city of the 1st century, the only women who did not wear a veil were the temple prostitutes. Any woman, therefore, who appeared on the public streets without a veil was opening herself up to the suspicion that she was available to any man who wanted to pay the price, that she was nothing more than a temple prostitute. It was indeed disgraceful, shameful, for a woman to appear in public, and especially to minister the Word in a Christian assembly, without that sign of acknowledgment of the principle of headship in her life.

Notice that Paul says, "if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her wear a veil." Mark the *if*. In some cultures it would not be disgraceful for a woman to be uncovered. It is not today. It is no longer shameful that a woman does not wear a hat in church. She is not open to abuse or suspicion of her moral character if she does not. It is only where it is disgraceful, where that is the usual interpretation put upon being uncovered, that this applies. If it is not disgraceful then it is another matter. But where it is disgraceful, as in Corinth, then Paul says that if she does not want to wear the sign of a relationship under headship, then she ought to go the whole way and shave her head like a prostitute because that is what she is proclaiming herself to be by her refusal to wear the veil and submit to custom.

Now, immediately, the apostle follows this with an explanation. Here we come to the very heart of the passage. He tells us why all this is true.

For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.) {1 Cor 11:7-9 RSV}

That is a very crucial paragraph, and one that we must note carefully and understand fully. You will notice the apostle does not base his reasons on any local custom. He goes back to creation to establish this. The principle of headship is something true from the beginning of mankind. Paul does just as Jesus did on the subject of divorce. He does not bother with the interpretations and amendments that came by the Law of Moses, but he goes back to God's original created order. So does the apostle here. He says that, in the beginning, man was made in the image and glory of God.

Image is the full manifestation of something. In this case it is God himself. Man was made in God's image in order that any creature, looking at a man, would see the likeness, the very nature of God. That is the dignity of humanity.

What we must bear clearly in mind is that, when Genesis states the man was made in the image of God, it was made before the two sexes were separated. Adam was first created, and it was of Adam, before Eve was separated from him, that it is said that man is the image and glory of God. This means that after the separation woman shares the image and the glory of God equally with the male. They are both included when it is said

that man was made in the image and the glory of God. That is why in Genesis 5 (not Genesis 1 now, but Genesis 5) it says that God created them in the beginning male and female and he named them Adam {Gen 5:1-2}. He did not name them the Adams's, he named them Adam. Therefore, the woman bears equally with the male the image and glory of God. That is very important. The male, however, is called upon to manifest a certain aspect of the glory of God different from that of the woman. We shall understand that better when we understand the meaning of glory.

What is glory? As it is used here, the word refers to something in which one takes delight. We have often sung the hymn, *In the Cross of Christ I Glory*. What do we mean by that? We mean the cross is something in which we find supreme delight. It is that principle of life by which we see ourselves cut off from the old Adam life and freed from the control of sin and death; thus set free to be the men and women God intended us to be. Understanding that we sing quite properly (along with the Apostle Paul), "In the Cross of Christ I Glory." Paul could write to the Thessalonians and say, "Who is our crown of rejoicing? Are you not our glory and our joy?" {cf, 1 Th 2:19}.

So used, this verse tells us that, when man was created, he was made to reflect the nature of God, and, in that, God takes great delight. He delights in mankind and this is what the male is to represent. That glory of God is to be publicly and openly manifested and that is why the man must not wear a veil. He is not to cover God's creative glory. He is to be unveiled so that the glory of God in creation should be visibly manifest to everyone.

You see this beautifully in the life of Jesus. Everywhere he went he demonstrated the love of God for mankind. Even though the race had turned aside and was far from what it ought to be, everywhere in the ministry of Jesus you see him pouring forth the love of God for man. That is what drew people by great multitudes to hear his words. In him they caught a glimpse of the glory and delight that God takes in humanity and they longed to find the way back to the enjoyment of that delight. Thus in the opening words of John's gospel it says, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," and "we beheld his glory," {John 1:14}. This is the glory that a man, a male, is called upon to manifest in the ministry of the Word. He is not to be veiled because he is proclaiming that open delight which God takes in the creation of mankind.

But woman is the glory of the man. It is in the woman that the man finds his delight, and, if you do not believe that, just watch a couple of teenagers in love. Woman is the delight of man. The apostle is now dealing with the woman as having been separated from the man. The distinction which obtained when God took Adam's rib and made of it a woman and brought her to man now comes into focus. It involves a private, intimate glory, that intimacy which a man finds in his wife, the intimacy of sexual relationship and of shared love. It is something hidden and private, therefore it is to be symbolized by a veil. It marks something protected, something marked out for a single individual's use. Thus the veil is not a mark of subjection, as many of the commentators say of this passage, it is a mark of intimacy, of privacy, voluntarily assumed by the woman. She is not forced to give herself to the man, she deliberately chooses to do so, but from then on she is marked out as belonging to him.

The nearest equivalent of this in our day is the wedding ring. A wedding ring marks a woman as belonging to another, already claimed. She has given herself freely and voluntarily to a man and she is his, not in a mechanical or merely legal sense, but because she has already surrendered her right to herself to him.

That is always the meaning of the veil in the Eastern World. It still is today. A veiled woman walks down a street of an Oriental city today and she is telling the whole world "I am not for sale; I do not belong to anyone but my husband; I am his."

In wearing a veil a woman also gives testimony to the existence of another aspect of the glory of God, the intimacy of delight that is achieved only through redemption. When we enter, by faith in Jesus Christ, into the new birth we discover a glory of God beyond creation. It is redemptive glory. We all have experienced it, if we are Christians. We know the ecstasy of fellowship with God, of worship, of experiencing the beautiful and intimate love relationship of a bride with her bridegroom, described in that marvelous passage in the fifth chapter of Ephesians. That is what a woman manifests in her public ministry when she wears a veil. She is symbolizing that intimate delight which God has in a redeemed mankind. I cannot now dwell on that, though I think it very important, but this is surely why Paul goes on to point out the unique purpose for the creation of

woman. "For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man."

Woman was taken from man in order that she might share fully his nature. Man and woman are not two different kinds of beings. They do not represent two species of human life. They have differences, but they are of the same basic nature. This is what is meant by 'woman being taken from man.' But, in addition, she is brought to man. She was brought to him that she might be 'for' him. This, I think, is the key thought involved in headship. She is *for* her husband; she is behind him, backing him up; she is supportive of him; she wants him to succeed and she is deeply involved in the process. She is undergirding him in every way she can, and finding delight in doing so, that together they might achieve the objectives which his head, Christ, has set before them.

Now, that is God's ideal of marriage.

In turn, the male is to discover the secrets God has put into his wife, and seek to develop her, so that she will be all that she is capable of being. In doing so he is but advancing his own objectives. This is the argument of Ephesians 5. They are one and no man hates his own flesh. If he hurts his wife he hurts himself; if he ignores her, he is ignoring half of his own life. There is no way that he can achieve the fullness of his manhood in marriage apart from working at developing and encouraging his wife to utilize all the gifts and abilities God has put in her. Thus, the reciprocal relationship so frequently appearing in Scripture on marriage. It is this that creates the beauty of every wedding. When a man and a woman stand together to be married, the marriage ceremony has for centuries recognized that she is giving herself to him, and he promises to treat that gift with kindness, tenderness and loving care. He is not giving himself to her; she is giving herself to him: That is the point. He is responsible to cherish that gift as the most valuable gift that any human has ever given him, and to protect it and guard it. She is basically saying to him those beautiful words in the book of Ruth, "Where you go I will go. Where you live I will live. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God," {cf, Ruth 1:16}. Now, if you do not want to do that, then do not get married -- because that is what marriage means. If man or a woman is not willing to assume his or her proper role in marriage, then, by all means, stay single, but when marriage occurs that is what is meant.

Paul goes on to add two more important words here from the argument of creation, first:

That is why a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels. {1 Cor 11:10 RSV}

What does he mean by that?

Unfortunately the RSV editors have obscured this by translating the word Paul uses as *veil*. But here he changes the word. He does not say "veil on her head" -- literally it is the word "authority." "That is why a woman ought to have authority on her head, because of the angels." Authority to do what? Surely it is what he has already mentioned, what the whole passage is about: A woman ministering the Word in public. The authority for her to do so is her recognition of the principle of headship. She is to declare that she does not pray or preach apart from her husband, and thus she is to wear a veil which, in that culture, was the sign of such a voluntary partnership.

She is to do so, Paul says, "because of the angels." Now that is somewhat obscure and difficult to interpret, but, in a culture where unveiled women were regarded as idolators and prostitutes, it would be an offense to the angels present in a Christian service for a woman to openly flaunt custom and deny the principle of headship. Angels, we are told, are "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to those who are heirs of salvation," {cf, Heb 1:14 KJV}. They were present at creation, and thus understand the principle of headship. Isaiah 6 indicates that they veil their faces when they worship before the throne of God {cf, Isa 6:2}, and so are concerned to preserve the worship of humans from any practice that would deny the distinctives which the sexes are to manifest.

In the next two verses Paul balances all this with a strong statement of the equality of men and women in marriage.

(Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.) {1 Cor 11:11-12 RSV}

Here is a very positive statement of the full equality (as persons) of men and women. There is no inferiority involved. No matter what distortions may have crept in to reduce woman to an inferior status, nevertheless, in the Lord, the original intent of God is restored. Paul carefully declares that man and woman cannot exist without each other. They are equal as persons, distinct as sexes, functioning in a divinely given order which is to be freely accepted by the woman, in order to demonstrate to all the delight of God in his creation and redemption of mankind. If we will carefully think that through we shall find it is a very powerful argument for equality of persons and distinctives of role.

Now let me quickly handle the problem of hair.

Judge for yourselves; is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her pride? For her hair is given to her for a covering. {1 Cor 11:13-15 RSV}

This is really a second argument the apostle gives to support the matter of wearing a veil. He argues now from nature. Not only does God's intent in creation sustain the principle of headship, but nature also illustrates it. Many have struggled over this passage. I have myself, for many years. What is there about nature that indicates that a man with long hair dishonors himself while a woman with long hair is honored? It is not mere intuition, as some suggest, for such an intuition is not universal. But there is a principle that science has come to recognize as true, and it has been true from the very beginning of the race, as far as we can tell. That is the factor of baldness.

Geneticists tell us that it takes two genes in a woman to produce baldness, but only one in a man. Some women do get bald, but it is very rare.

Here is a natural factor that has been functioning since the race began which does, indeed, display the very thing that Paul declares. Did you ever see a bald old man with long hair? It is a disgrace! Long hair is usually stringy when it is sparse and with his shining dome sticking up above it makes him look ridiculous. Almost all men, as they grow older, tend to show some degree of baldness, and the older they grow the more ridiculous long hair looks. A young man can get away with long hair, but an older man cannot. Thus there is a factor in nature which demonstrates what Paul claims.

Tradition tells us that Paul himself was bald and perhaps this statement comes out of his own experience.

But a woman is a different story. Many of you know that my wife's mother lives with us. She turned 91 last August, and like anyone of that age her skin has lost its tone and its beauty. Many wrinkles have lined her face and she displays all the signs of aging, yet her hair (which she usually wears in a bun), when let down, falls well below her waist. It is a beautiful thing and is her pride and glory. At 91 her hair is as beautiful as it was when she was a young girl. In fact it has only a few streaks of gray in it.

This is exactly what the apostle claims here. Nature demonstrates that a woman has been given more beautiful hair than men in order that she might more easily manifest the principle of headship.

It is remarkable that this was written after all Paul's insistence about wearing a veil in Corinth. Now Paul says that her hair was given to her for a covering.

Here is the beauty of the Scripture. This was not written just for Corinth, or even for the 1st century, but for any and every age. This is what the apostle means. In a culture where the wearing of veils is not a custom, then a woman's long hair (longer than her husband's), is an adequate expression of the principle of headship. Surely this will help us today when the wearing of veils has lost all its original significance. But, because in the Roman world veil-wearing was still the custom, he concludes the passage with these words.

If any one is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God. {1 Cor 11:16 RSV}

There is no need to argue the point, he says. The universal custom in the Roman world was for the woman to declare this principle of headship by wearing a veil, therefore there is no point in arguing about it. It was such a widespread custom among the churches that anybody not doing so was immediately opening themselves up to disapprobation, yet where that was not the case then the woman's hair, longer than her husband's, was adequate testimony to the principle of headship.

Now what does this passage say to us?

Let me gather it up very quickly. It says:

1. First, men, by all means take your responsibility as spiritual leaders in the home. You have a responsibility to your head to know the Word of God and to see that it shapes and molds the atmosphere, the climate of your home. That is your responsibility.
2. Women, your responsibility is to follow your husband in these matters, and to support him and encourage him. If you are unwilling to do that, do not get married, but if you marry, support your husband's efforts toward a godly family. Back him up when he moves in those directions. Let him know you are behind him, for him, and supportive of him. That is the way you will find fulfillment in marriage.

Consider this remarkable testimony from a well-known authoress. In a recent interview of Taylor Caldwell by *Family Weekly*, the authoress was asked if the nine-hour TV production of her book, *Captains and Kings*, would bring her solid satisfaction. Her answer was,

There is no solid satisfaction in any career for a woman like myself. There is no home, no true freedom, no hope, no joy, no expectation for tomorrow, no contentment. I would rather cook a meal for a man and bring him his slippers and feel myself in the protection of his arms than have all the citations and awards and honors I have received worldwide, including the Ribbon of Legion of Honor and my property and my bank accounts. They mean nothing to me. And I am only one among the millions of sad women like myself.

3. Third, when women minister the Word in a public place let them do so with humility and respect for the leadership of the church.

That is what is involved in the principle of headship.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the faithful teaching of your Word. We pray that we may remember that our views of life are often shallow, superficial and inadequate, but whenever we conform to the divinely given order we find ourselves opening a door into joy and love and peace such as we never dreamed of; that your yoke is easy and your burden is light. We pray that we may indeed discover this and as men and women together fulfill the demands of the headship given to us. Let us remember that the head of every man is Christ, the head of the woman is her husband. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: What is Headship?

By: Ray C. Stedman

Series: Studies in First Corinthians

Scripture: 1 Cor 11:2-16

Message No: 23

Catalog No: 3593
Date: December 3, 1978

[PBC Homepage](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [Ray Stedman Library](#)

[Copyright \(C\) 1995 Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.