

Mt Albert Baptist Church 25 May 2010
Head Coverings

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1 Corinthians 11:2-16

²I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. ³Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. ⁶If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. ⁷A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. ¹¹In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹²For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. ¹³Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. ¹⁶If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

Once again, much of the letter to the Corinthians is Paul's response to questions and issues that the church in Corinth was facing. So this letter has been described as being like listening to one side of a telephone conversation.

We find out about the issues being addressed by doing a bit of detective work by reading between the lines, as well as from the understanding we can gain from other sources, such as the culture and context into which Paul is writing.

When we read Scripture, we can understand it in purely literal terms, and take everything at face value, or we can drill down and find the deeper meaning in the form of values and principles.

If we read Scripture only in the literal sense, then we're just going to follow the instructions, do what we're told, without really understanding why. If we do that, then we're really only like indentured servants. We need to understand God's principles and values behind what is written.

One highly experienced pastor once told me of his frustration that so many people ask him what to believe on various issues - in other words, what is the party-line; the policy that we should be following?

But when we dig deeper and ask the question "why?" then we become more Christ-centred in our thinking, and are enabled to make God-inspired decisions; we take ownership of our faith, and don't need to ask the pastor what we're supposed to believe.

Here's what Jesus said about this in John 15:15:

"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you".

When it comes to this passage before us, I going to assume that we're all in favour of drilling down to find the deeper meaning. Why? Because I see lots of women without their heads covered, and no one seems to be particularly upset about it.

The big problem we face as we read this passage, as with many other instances in Scripture, is that we tend to read it with the only set of eyes we have, and these eyes are firmly rooted here at the cutting edge of time in the 21st C.

This has led some less informed people to regard the Apostle Paul as a male chauvinist, with his expectations of submission and head coverings for women. However, quite the opposite is true: One of my favourite verses is Gal 3:28 where Paul wrote *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"*. When we read that, with our egalitarian mind-set we think "that makes sense", whereas the original readers would've been horrified!

Paul is ranking Jews alongside Gentiles, slaves alongside free men, and women alongside men! This is a radical and inflammatory stance to take! Such egalitarianism was unheard of in the ancient world!

Since a central theme of Galatians is whether non-Jews need to be circumcised in order to become Christians, we can assume that the original readers would've thought that Of course Jews are superior to Gentiles. Of course free men are superior to slaves. Of course men are superior to women! And yet Paul is saying "no, we're all equal in the eyes of God".

When the Telecom XT mobile network went down earlier this year, there was an incident where a fed up telecom staff member sent an abusive txt to a complaining customer. The thing that made it most noteworthy wasn't the abusive nature of the txt, but rather the fact that that somewhere in New Zealand a telecom customer actually received a txt!

Likewise, the controversial thing here in today's passage is not the immediately apparent matter that Paul demands that women cover their heads when they pray or prophesy. Rather, the original readers would have been shocked that Paul says it's OK for women to pray or prophecy out loud at all! This was unheard of back then.

Again if we read this passage at face value, then it does look like Paul is setting up a hierarchy that has Christ at the top – no problem there – but with women at the bottom, which I'm sure that the average 21st C. emancipated woman is going to find a bit hard to swallow.

However, if we drill a bit deeper, and with a bit of awareness of the issues that translation raises, then we find that it's not quite that simple. In the Greek the word Paul uses that is translated as "head" is kephalē, which can also be translated as "source", such as the source or headwaters of a river.

There's a strong theme in 1 Corinthians where Paul is encouraging an attitude of order in worship. The talk of source, or origins has echoes of the Genesis account of the creation order, where woman is created from man, illustrating

that God is about order not chaos. So it's more about order in worship than it is about hierarchy, or lording it over subordinates.

Furthermore, in God's way of doing things, we are given the freewill choice of whether we submit ourselves to Christ. Therefore God's way requires that authority and submission are not things that are demanded or imposed, rather they are something we choose submit to or adopt.

Yes, there is a sense of subordination here, but as with the head coverings which we'll talk about in a minute, this is in line with the cultural expectations of the day, and Paul is concerned that people don't compromise the cause of Christ by rocking the cultural boat unnecessarily.

Now some might balk at that, saying that equality and women's rights is a cause worth rocking the boat over, which indeed it has become, but women's rights is an issue that truly came of age in the 20th C. But it hadn't back then. It's the same, for instance, with the issue of slavery. Christians were at the forefront of the abolition of slavery, and quite rightly so.

Slavery is without doubt an abomination. But in Paul's day, something like two thirds of the Roman Empire were slaves, and we don't see Paul challenging this. In fact, the letter to Philemon is all about Paul sending his friend Onesimus – a runaway slave – back to his owner, who is also a Christian.

Most cultures have in their history a hierarchical order where women are subordinate to men. This doesn't mean that this is how God sees things, in fact, the Galatians verse tells us quite the opposite. But in this case the issues of inequality were not going to be dealt with by a few people flouting social and cultural protocols of order and propriety. And Paul apparently feels that they're going to do more damage than good to the cause of Christ in this instance.

Quite simply, this was not the time and place for this particular cause. The teacher of Ecclesiastes tells us that *"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven"*. (Ecc 3:1)

This doesn't mean that the issue is unimportant, just that God will deal with it in His time – and He may even do it by inspiring us to challenge social and cultural conventions.

Such was the case in Dec 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, when a 42 year old seamstress named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus.

That simple act was instrumental in igniting the American Civil rights movement of the mid 20th C. Rosa Parks didn't mean to cause trouble – she'd just had a tiring day. But hers was a cause whose time had come. Does this mean that up until that point God wasn't interested in the plight of those "sweltering under the heat of racial oppression" (as Martin Luther King put it)? Not at all! But God chose to deal with it when the time was right.

There are issues on the large scale, as well as on the small scale that God will deal with in His own time. But all of these issues are still subordinate to the purposes of Christ, and to His mission. So it would be a mistake to make this passage about gender inequality.

So now let's drill down a bit into the matter of head coverings. Why it is that Paul is writing this, and why *don't* we observe it today? Especially considering his words *"If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God"*.

It is important that our lives are relevant to the context where God has placed us. For a woman to not wear a head covering in Paul's day would be counter

to the social context. To make a big issue about wearing one today would also be counter to contemporary social context.

Recently there was a news item about the new British Deputy PM's plan to repeal some of the more archaic laws in Britain: Such as the law from 1797 that banned people from wearing a top hat after London haberdasher John Hetherington showed off his creation round the city.

The sight of his hat caused quite a stir and apparently "people booed, several women fainted and a small boy got his arm broken", when a crowd formed around Mr Hetherington. And so, top hats were banned.

Until 1976 cab drivers were required by law to carry a bale of hay to feed a horse

Or my favourite, apparently the law still exists in Britain that allows a pregnant woman to demand the use of a policeman's helmet if she can't find a convenient toilet.

Before this church was established, those who founded it walked from Mt Albert to Mt Eden to go to church, because to catch public transport on a Sunday was deemed inappropriate. Such an issue wouldn't be worth making a stand on today – how many people here came by public transport? Let alone horse-drawn tram?

So some of the issues that were contentious in previous generations, may well be non-issues today, and not be worth making a fuss over.

Society has protocols. Often, people try to push the boundaries of these protocols. For some, like Rosa Parks, this is a worthy thing to do. But in other cases, pushing the boundaries lacks the same virtue and purpose.

I think one of the best commentaries of society's protocols is the TV ad for tip top trumpet where it determines whether the man is wearing togs or undies – which depends entirely on the context – when he's within view of the water, they're togs – as soon as he walks into the shopping centre, mothers are covering their children's eyes.

One of the weirder things I've experienced happened a few years back when I worked on Grafton Rd opposite Starship hospital. One morning in the middle of winter I was walking to work from the bus stop on Symonds St across Grafton Bridge.

There were a whole lot of people running around on the bridge in their underwear as some sort of radio station stunt. It was quite surreal. This woman runs up to me and says "what about you, are you going to get your kit off?" I just looked at her derisively and said "no" and kept on walking. Why would I do something like that? For starters it was *far* too cold. And I'm not prone to that sort of behaviour even when it's warm!

What they were doing was socially inappropriate, and that's why they were doing it – to provoke a reaction. Personally I thought it was pretty juvenile behaviour.

Society sets standards, and for us as followers of Jesus, whether or not we should break those standards depends on our attitude and motivation.

In 1st C. Greek culture, a woman wouldn't normally be seen in public with her head uncovered. It would be an inappropriate thing to do.

There were exceptions to this, but none of them were valid in Paul's opinion. One of them was the temple prostitutes involved in the cult of sex worship, which as we've already heard, Paul didn't want the Corinthian church to be associated with.

The context and co-text of this letter has led us to believe that the women Paul was writing to were married. A woman with an uncovered head was sending the implicit signal that she was available. And so a married woman with an uncovered head was effectively not acknowledging her marital status. It was kind of like a married person going into a bar and deliberately taking their wedding ring off.

It appears that some of the women in the Corinthian church were getting quite excited during worship, and throwing off their head coverings. Now for a situation where men didn't usually get to see bare-headed women, this would have caused something of a distraction – like the radio station stunt on Grafton bridge – and would therefore not have been conducive to focused or orderly worship.

So if that's the case, why were men prohibited from praying with their heads covered, and how does this dishonour their head? Well, in the culture of the day, the prevailing custom for men was to pray with heads uncovered, but some pagan priests who were from the upper classes claimed greater spiritual status by praying with their heads covered. This was their way of saying "I'm important".

So for a man to pray with his head covered was a form of self-aggrandisement. There's a belief that some men were bringing this practice into the gathering of believers. As I said last time I preached when I spoke about lawsuits, self promotion and building our own little empires is incompatible with faith in Christ, which calls us to glorify Him, not ourselves.

So the head the man is dishonouring is not his own cranium, it's his head or source: ie Christ. The man is seeking to draw attention to himself, when according to Paul, he is the image of God, not God himself. Likewise when the woman prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, she's dishonouring her marriage vows, by saying "I'm available", and therefore dishonours her head, or source in the creation order: her husband.

It seems that the Corinthians had readily grasped the idea of freedom in Christ, and felt that it applied in all sorts of areas – possibly including the mutual submission and exclusivity of a husband and wife. Jonathan's already talked about the Gnostic influence in the Corinthian church. The word Gnostic comes from the Greek word Gnosis, meaning knowledge.

Adherents to Gnosticism claimed to have gained a special spiritual knowledge or insight, which is itself an arrogant and counter Christian claim. Gnosticism didn't assert its full influence in the church until the 2nd C, but the philosophy was in it's infancy at the time Paul was writing to the Corinthians.

Gnosticism held that the spirit was pure, but the flesh was evil, and that the one didn't influence the other, therefore it doesn't matter what you do with your body, so long as your spirit remains pure. So people felt they could get away with all manner of things with their bodies without compromising their Spiritual purity.

The reality is, that our lives are synergistic in nature. Our mental health, our physical health and our spiritual health all intersect, and all have an impact on each other.

How we conduct ourselves in the area of sexuality - married or not - is a reflection of our spiritual maturity, and has an influence on our spiritual growth and development.

There are a couple of things in this passage that are a bit confusing, and probably need to be addressed: first, there's that bit where Paul says "because of the Angels". I did a bit of digging to see what various commentators thought Paul was referring to here, but no one seems to have a particularly satisfactory explanation, so I guess this is one of those times when we'll just have to say "we don't know" what Paul's on about.

Then there's the bit where Paul extols long hair for women, but condemns long hair for men. There's all manner of suggestions as to what this is about. Some fringe Christian groups have taken this literally: in the exclusive brethren, all the men have short-back-and -sides, all of the women have long hair and wear headscarves.

In taking the passage purely on a literal basis, they risk missing out on the principles and values it contains. I think it's less about regulations on hair length – what constitutes long hair on a man? Anything other than short-back-and sides? Are all women required to have long hair? If so, how long?

There's one suggestion that it's challenging the practice of homosexuals having long hair, but that's one commentator's suggestion.

What seems to make the most sense to me is that Paul is highlighting the fact that men and women are indeed different, and that this is something worth celebrating. Different doesn't mean superior or inferior – it just means different.

One of the key things I believe Paul is challenging in this passage is the issue of activism for activism's sake. When I was growing up, our neighbours across the road had a black Labrador named Link. Link loved chasing cars. We lived on a side street, and when a car went past, Link would take off after it, and disappear off down the hill barking all the way. A few moments later, another car would come back the other way, with Link in hot pursuit.

One day I saw Link chasing a car, and the car stopped. Link skidded to a halt on his haunches on the grass verge, and sat there barking at the car, not quite sure what to do. Chasing cars was one thing, but he didn't know what to do with one when he caught it.

There are people whose whole outlook is geared towards challenging the status quo, and there are times when they are right – some things need to be challenged, we need activists. But all too often, they're chasing causes because that's what they do. What's more, they don't know what to do when they get what they're pursuing. Their mindset is so geared towards activism, that when things are going well, they'll still find something to challenge, and in doing so risk compromising the wider mission of Christ.

I think in essence what Paul's saying here is "pick your battles guys". Don't make an issue of minor things at the cost of the church's reputation and credibility. If we're going to make a stand on something, we should ask ourselves if it's worth it.

There's a saying that I really like that says "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing". There is the ongoing danger that we get distracted from the central message of the Gospel. When we look at the things that we make issues of, matters that we take a stand on, we should always ask: what does this do for the Name of Christ? Does it bring Him glory and honour? Or does it drag His name into disrepute?

Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel, two of history's greatest composers made a practice of writing the letters SDG on the end of their musical manuscripts. It stood for Soli Deo Gloria – Glory to God alone.

As followers of Jesus, our purpose, our *raison d'être*, our reason for being, should have at its very core, the purposes of God. There should never be a time when we put our desire for significance, for freedom or for status ahead of our determination to see God glorified.

Soli Deo Gloria