

## “Coiffures, Pompadours and Corporate Worship” 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

### Introduction

- In Greek mythology [Scylla](#) and [Charybdis](#) were two sea monsters. Scylla had twelve feet and six heads, each with three rows of teeth, and she lived in a cave on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean. Whenever a ship would pass by her cliff her six heads would seize six crew members and devour them. Charybdis, on the other hand, was a monster in the form of a gigantic mouth. She lived in the water and as she sucked down water to quench her thirst she'd create a deadly whirlpool. These two monsters lived opposite each other separated only by a narrow strait of water. And as ships navigated the waters near these two monsters they were forced to make a choice. If they chose to avoid Charybdis, the whirlpool, they'd have to pass right by the Scylla on the rocky cliff. And if they chose to avoid Scylla on the cliff, they'd have to pass near Charybdis and her whirlpool. In either case it was a lose-lose situation. In fact, the phrase “between a rock and a hard place” probably comes from the mythological story of Scylla and Charybdis.
- This passage, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, is a proverbial rock and a hard place; it is one very difficult text. This section of 1 Corinthians has been called by one scholar “the most complex, controversial, and opaque of any text of comparable length in the New Testament.”<sup>1</sup> And I would tend to agree. Just a simple reading of any English translation is enough to surface a number of hair-raising questions; pun definitely intended. Questions like, “What practice is Paul referring to when he speaks of uncovered heads and shame? When heads are covered is Paul referring to hair itself or some additional covering? Why does Paul concentrate on the concept of shame?”<sup>2</sup> Should women today cover their heads? I could go on and on.
- Regardless of how much I've labored in prayer or in study this week, regardless of how well I might navigate these verses now, it feels like a Scylla or Charybdis is waiting. I just don't feel qualified to guide you safely through all the complexities and potential pitfalls of this passage.
- Let me say something we all know but struggle with at times. God's word is clear—even difficult passages like this. Sin may cloud our judgment and our understanding of God's word but that doesn't mean Scripture is unclear. So when we come to a difficult passage our prayer must be that the Holy Spirit would illumine our hearts, cut through our sinfulness, and bring to light the truth of God's Word. So right now God we pray that you would give us grace; that your Spirit might navigate us safely into all truth.
- Let me also say that context is king—especially for difficult passages like this one. Scripture does not exist in a vacuum. It must never be interpreted in isolation, either from the rest of scripture, or in our case, from its surrounding context—the letter to the Corinthians. Context must determine meaning. Let me also say that context necessarily makes background material absolutely critical for understanding what Paul says in this passage. Paul's letters are occasional meaning they were written at a specific time to address specific issues. And if

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<sup>1</sup> Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary*, p. 214.

<sup>2</sup> Liefeld, p. 145.

we are going to bridge two thousand years so that this passage isn't left as some relic from the 1<sup>st</sup> century we first have to understand what the passage said in its original context before we can make the jump and answer the question of what it means for us now. If we skip that step, we will abuse scripture and make it say something it never intended to say.

- Let's talk about context for a second. More than anything else this passage is about corporate worship. Yes male and female relationships are discussed but they're discussed in the context of what was happening in the Corinthian worship services. Verse 4 talks about praying and prophesying. Those things would only have occurred as the body of Christ gathered to worship corporately. Paul has in mind what you and I are doing right here, right now. In fact, starting in chapter 11 and running all the way through chapter 14 all the issues relate to dysfunctional aspects of corporate worship. Corporate worship snafus. Look at verse 17 through the end of the chapter and the eating of the Lord's Supper. *Your meetings do more harm than good* he says. Corporate worship. Chapter 12-14 and spiritual gifts. That whole discussion is framed in the context of the improper use of those gifts in a corporate worship setting. Look at 14:26. *What then shall we say brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.* Corporate worship. Paul ends chapter 14 with an appeal that all corporate worship be done *in a fitting and orderly way*.
- The other thing I want you to notice contextually is the language of shame-glory that's repeated throughout this passage. There is a clear connection between Paul's statement in 10:31 *whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God* and the shame-glory language in 11:2-16. This passage is much more closely related to what precedes that first appears. The implication is that the Corinthians were not glorifying God in their worship services. Instead, they were shaming God or dishonoring God by their behavior. They shamed God by the way they celebrated the Lord's Supper. They shamed him by the way they used their spiritual gifts. This passage and the sections we are going to look at in the coming weeks are especially instructive as to what it means to gather together in the name of Christ to worship corporately.

### Transition

So what specifically does this passage teach? Very clearly I think these words teach us that, during corporate worship, when Christians gather...

### Proposition

- **Anything that glorifies self destroys corporate worship**

### Transition

I believe there are...

### Organizational Sentence

- **Three qualities of corporate worship that demote self and glorify God**

### Transition

If you're thinking "where in the world is that in this passage?" **Anything that glorifies self destroys corporate worship?** It's there. Let me see if I can draw it out. By the way we're only

going to get through the first point this morning. We'll cover the second and third next week. There's just too much to deal with in the first six five verses of this section.

### Background/Setting

- As scholars continue learning about the situation in Corinth it's becoming clearer how pervasive this movement called Sophism had become. Sophism, at least by the first century AD, as a movement, focused not so much on a set of philosophical beliefs but the manner in which those beliefs were defended and argued for in public. Sophists were hucksters, professional speech makers, rhetoricians trained in the use of wise and persuasive speech. And they attracted huge followings, students, and money. Their influence on the Mediterranean world was enormous.<sup>3</sup>
- What happened in Corinth is that this self-promotion and attention grabbing popularized by the Sophists trickled down through every level of society—even the church. In the words of one scholar, “self-promotion had become an art form...Corinth was a magnet for the socially ambitious...status hungry people.”<sup>4</sup> We get glimpses of their influence in the church through Paul's words in 1:20. *Where is the wise man? Where is he scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age?* And then again in 2:1 where Paul says of himself, *When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom.* Presumably, he means, like the Sophists.
- Fast forward now to chapter 11. We now know with a fair amount of certainty that in Roman society (and Corinth was a first-class Romanized Greek city) respectable women would show nothing more than their face in public.<sup>5</sup> Everything else was covered. Respectable women simply would not draw attention to themselves by leaving their heads uncovered. Prostitutes uncovered their heads to draw attention to themselves, but not respectable women. The veil constituted a “badge of honor, of sexual reserve and a *mastery of self*.”<sup>6</sup> Abandoning it signaled a lack of self-discipline, a flaunting of personal rights and a shameless show of self.
- So the question for us is why in the world were the women in the Corinthian church praying and prophesying with uncovered heads, why were they discarding and abandoning the customary mode of dress for a respectable woman at that time? I think that the spirit of the Sophists, this spirit of self-promotion, this ambitious hunger for status filtered down to the women in the church who began abandoning their head coverings in order to draw attention to themselves. The sad picture is of some socially ambitious women in the church who were so hungry for status they began self-promoting through their worship. Sick.
- The problem for Paul was not hair or even shawls. And the issue for us today is not about bringing back head coverings for women. In fact, I can imagine a present day scenario in which a woman, for the sake of wanting to appear more spiritual than they really are, for the sake of drawing attention to self, might wear a head covering and violate the intent of this passage. The problem in Corinth was the flagrant promotion of self. The me show. That's

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<sup>3</sup> Carson, Moo, and Morris, p. 281-2.

<sup>4</sup> NDBT, p. 298.

<sup>5</sup> NDBT, p. 302 quoting A. Rouselle, ‘Body politics in ancient Rome’, in G. Duby and M. Perot [eds.], *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 1 [Cambridge, MA 1992], p. 296-337; quotation from pp. 314-15. See also Thisleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 801.

<sup>6</sup> Thisleton, p. 802.

what was so shameful, disgraceful. It destroyed corporate worship then and it can and will destroy corporate worship now. It's the antithesis of Christian worship.

### Transition

So what does Paul suggest to correct this? In [verses 2-6](#) he suggests that the **kind of worship that pleases God is first of all submissive**. Listen. *I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. 3 Now 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. 4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. 5 And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head--it is just as though her head were shaved. 6 If 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.*

### Main Points

- The key to this whole section is [verse 3](#). That Paul is hinting at something more than just male-female relationships is seen by how he orders this set of three relationships. First man. Then woman. Finally Christ. If the issue was just about insubordinate women then this order—man, woman, Christ—doesn't make sense. If the issue was just about insubordinate women the sequence probably would have been Christ, man, woman.
- Instead, Paul ends this triad of relationships emphasizing Christ's relationship with the Father. *And the head of Christ is God*. It's in this relationship that Paul finds the theological reason for refuting the shameless self-promotion of both women and men in the Corinthian church.
- Christ's relationship to God, as well as all the other relational pairs in these verses, is captured through Paul's use of the word *head*. I can't even begin to explain to you how hotly debated the meaning of this word is suffice to say that the best and most recent scholarship suggests that the meaning of this word at the time of Paul's writing the Corinthian letter is not [source](#), head as source, but something more like [chief](#) or [leader](#).<sup>7</sup> The word implies authority, rule, and for those under this chief or leader or *head*, it implies subordination.
- I want you to notice that a play on words in verses 2-5. Paul uses the word *head* both metaphorically and literally. [SHOW SLIDE] The all caps HEAD is the metaphorical use. The lowercase letters mean Paul is using the word literally to refer to a person's physical head. "The main point of this paragraph is the claim that what one does or doesn't put on one's physical head either honors or dishonors one's spiritual head."<sup>8</sup>
- When Paul says that *the head of Christ is God*, what he's saying is that God is Christ's leader, Christ's chief. And in the same way, the *head of every man is Christ and the head of the woman is man*. And this God-Christ relationship is the model for what should happen in Christian worship. From passages like Philippians 2 we have a better idea of what this means when it says that Christ, *who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing taking the very nature of a servant*.

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<sup>7</sup> See BAGD entry on *keqalh*. See DA Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies*, p. 35-37. See Anthony Thisleton's commentary on 1 Corinthians. See Wayne Grudem's *The Meaning of Kephale ("Head"): A Response to Recent Studies in Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, p. 425.

<sup>8</sup> Blomberg, p. 208.

- The New Testament has no problem with this idea of subordination that we as moderns find so distasteful. In fact, the New Testament clearly teaches that among the members of the Trinity there is ontological equality, equality of being, but also functional subordination, subordination of role. And I want to suggest as [David Garland](#) does, “That... Jesus the Son of God manifested his equality with God the Father precisely in fulfilling a role of subordination to Him.”<sup>9</sup> It is Christ’s submissive spirit, at least according to Philippians 2, that is so glorifying to God. Paul’s basic premise in this passage is that what’s good for the goose is good for the gander. If submitting to his Head, laying aside self, is good for Christ, it’s good for us.
- What Paul seems to be emphasizing with this mention of *the head of Christ is God* relationship is that it is characterized by selflessness. In other words, “the God-Christ relationship has nothing to do with self-glory or with affirmation of self at the expense of the other.”<sup>10</sup> That Christ submitted, subordinated his will to the Father as Head—all caps—is the supreme expression of selflessness. This selfless love, this giving up of self, this giving up of one’s rights for the sake of one’s Head—those characteristics are the things that should be reflected in Christian worship.
- And when the Corinthian women discarded their head coverings to draw attention to self or to have others affirm self they shamed their head both literally and metaphorically. *Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.* Their behavior wasn’t glorifying God. Just the opposite. Their selfish glory-seeking worship was shameful because it failed to reflect the attitude of Christ who submitted himself to his Head.
- That’s why Paul, I think, sarcastically says to the women in Corinth, “okay if that’s the way you’re going to act,” [verse 6](#), “you might as well go full bore and take your shame to the extreme and shave your head.” As the [New Living Translation](#) puts it. *Yes, if she refuses to wear a head covering, she should cut off all her hair! But since it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut or her head shaved, she should wear a covering.*
- What matters most is imitating Christ, following the example of Christ, 11:1, in everything—especially in corporate worship.
- Here’s the application for us and the primary application has to do with worship. Worship must be selfless. I want you to take a look at a video clip that pokes fun at how selfish we’ve allowed church to become. [Show video]
- It’s funny because it hits too close to home doesn’t it? We are far more selfish in our worship than we realize. We need to ask ourselves some tough questions. As we think about this, our corporate worship together; is it characterized by humility, selflessness and the giving up of rights? Or are we the Me Church where it’s all about us? Do our leaders, those leading worship, do they self-promote while they lead? As we worship are we fostering, even if it’s unintentionally, a “hey, look at me, I’m so spiritual” mentality? Think of all the various ways in which we worship corporately; reading, singing, testimonies, preaching, praying, playing music, hand raising, quietness and stillness. Have we allowed self-glory and self-promotion and selfishness to creep in? Worship that likes the limelight and the attention is distinctly un-Christian worship.

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<sup>9</sup> Garland, p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> Thisleton, p. 804.

## Conclusion

- Have you ever watched sea gulls? Writer Philip Yancey tells of a time when he sat overlooking a craggy harbor and watched one. He writes, the seagull “exults in freedom. He thrusts his wings backward with powerful strokes, climbing higher and higher until he's above all the other gulls, then coasts downward in majestic loops and circles. He constantly performs, as if he knows a movie camera is trained on him, recording. In a flock, though, the sea gull is a different bird. His majesty and dignity melt into a sordid slough of infighting and cruelty. Watch that same gull as he dive bombs into a group of gulls, provoking a flurry of scattered feathers and angry squawks to steal a tiny morsel of meat. The concepts of sharing and manners do not exist among gulls. They are so fiercely competitive and jealous that if you tie a red ribbon around the leg of one gull, making him stand out, you sentence him to execution. The others in the flock will furiously attack him with claws and beaks, hammering through feathers and flesh to draw blood. They'll continue until he lies flattened in a bloody heap.”<sup>11</sup>
- In the end, worship that glorifies self breeds competition, shames our calling as Christians and destroys.

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<sup>11</sup> Phillip Yancey, as quoted in *The Strong Willed Child* by James Dobson (Tyndale House, 1995); submitted to [preachingtoday.com](http://preachingtoday.com) by Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, Illinois