

Sessions 13 - Wives, Women and Propriety in Worship

(I Corinthians 11:2-16)

“And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...” I Corinthians 11:5

- I. Propriety in Worship, the context and the problem.
 - A. The context of I Corinthians 11:2 – 16.
 1. Paul was constantly addressing the tension between freedom in Christ (I Corinthians 1:4 – 9) and the potential abuse of that freedom in I Corinthians (e.g. I Corinthians 11:17 – 22).
 2. The setting was the public assembly of the church (debated whether this is public worship specifically).
 3. It is debated whether Paul is addressing husbands/wives or men/women.
 4. Paul wishes this fast growing and culturally diverse congregation to hold fast to the *paradosis* (teachings or more accurately traditions which have been handed down by him). The Corinthians apparently had not held to these traditions.
 - B. The problem in Corinth was that some women were clearly disrupting the public assemblies of the congregation. This disruption was an abuse of the freedom these women gained through Christ.
 1. The overt problem was that women, during their participation in public assemblies of the congregation (debated whether this specifically refers to worship), were disrupting the congregation by acting in ways in which they would not act outside assemblies of the church, that is in the marketplace or the streets. The disruption in some way was connected with head coverings. Men may also have been acting inappropriately.
 2. The underlying problem, based upon what precedes this passage, was probably the relationship between freedom in Christ and the need to maintain societal customs in order to win others to Christ. (I Corinthians 9:19 – 23)
 - C. The relevance of the passage for the study of the role of women in the church today derives from three issues Paul addresses or alludes to:
 1. Proper hairstyles or head coverings for women in the public assembly.
 2. Paul’s reference to the created order. (We discussed this previously in Session 6.)
 3. The question of whether women were praying and prophesying during public assemblies in the Corinthian church.
 - D. The purpose of the passage probably derives from I Corinthians 10:32, 33, “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking

my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.” The theme is typical of Paul when it comes to public assemblies. (Romans 14, Galatians 5:13)

- II. A review of Paul’s reference to the Created Order (I Corinthians 11:7 – 12).
 - A. If one reads Genesis 2 as establishing male spiritual leadership and I Timothy 2 as a statement affirming male spiritual leadership, then I Corinthians 11:7 - 12 should be read as an additional affirmation of male spiritual leadership established at creation. This divine order, if accepted, will lead to love and harmony among members of the church and in marriages. Complementary roles do not necessarily lead to conflict.
 - B. If one reads Genesis 2 as not establishing male spiritual leadership and reads Galatians 3:28 as signifying that Christ re-established the divine mutuality present at creation, then I Corinthians 11:7 – 12 should be read as an analogy applicable to the specific situation in Corinth. Bowing to the societal prohibitions of the day in the light of freedom in Christ will lead to harmony and love in the church.
 - C. Whether Paul is referring to a divine principle (deference to male spiritual leadership) or to a temporal principle (don’t flaunt your freedom in the light of societal prohibitions if not necessary), the practical message is the same (I Corinthians 10:32, 33).

- III. An analysis of I Corinthians 11:2 – 16
 - A. Paul’s reference to *paradosis* (literally traditions) in v. 2 probably does not mean tradition as we mean it. The teachings came ultimately from the Lord and were handed to the Corinthians from the Lord through Paul.
 - B. Paul constantly pleads in I Corinthians for propriety and order based in love (I Corinthians 14:40). Why was the concern regarding propriety directed to head coverings?
 - 1. For Jews today (both men and women), worshiping without one’s head covered is regarded with stern disapproval. The glory of the Almighty surrounded and rested upon the man and woman during worship. As a sign of reverence and humility, the worshiper wore a head covering during worship. Nevertheless, during the time of Christ, the Jewish man probably did not cover his head during prayer yet the Jewish woman did (men began covering their heads during prayer in the 4th century AD).
 - 2. Jewish women were required to wear their hair bound up whenever they left their homes (not just in worship). Unbound, flowing hair was considered sensual and unbecoming of a spiritual woman. Young girls wore long hair, but married women wore their hair bound up on their heads (perhaps with braids or hair pins). On the other hand, prostitutes wore their hair short (even shorter than males).

3. During the classical period of Greece, wives wore scarves long enough so that they could wrap one end of the cloth around their faces. Yet there was no clear requirement that Jewish women must be veiled during everyday life when they left the home (as is common in some Arab countries today).
4. On the other hand, among the Romans it was more usual for women in public to have their heads covered and men to have their heads uncovered. The same was true for the Jews. This covering was not the Middle Eastern veil of today but more like a shawl. This covering was also the probable covering used in worship.
5. The connection of the head covering and submission to one's husband is probable but not entirely clear, especially in public settings.
6. In brief, proper head coverings were important societal norms in Corinth among the various cultural groups and the practice varied widely from Jew to Greek to Roman. Head coverings were therefore a prime area where societal norms could be challenged (much like wearing a dress which did not rise above the ankles would have been an important societal norm during the Victorian era). Given that we don't fully know the societal norms at that time, this passage is more difficult to interpret.

- C. What exactly was Paul writing about in reference to head coverings?
1. Hairstyle, such as might distinguish a single and married woman?
Probably not.
 2. Veils, such as used in the Arab world today? Probably not.
 3. A garment which was pulled over the head about to the ears (such as a shawl). Most likely.
- D. The Greek words *aner* and *gyne* may either refer to husband and wife or man and woman. Many believe that the context suggests husband and wife in this passage though the most straightforward interpretation is man and woman.
- E. The Greek word *kephale*, which we translate as head, has received much attention by commentators. In secular Greek, the term means not only the "head" of an animal or human but also the "beginning" (such as the prow of a ship or the source of a river). Therefore the word may mean authority or it may mean source. The best translation is authority but source is a reasonable alternative.
- F. The context of this passage strongly suggests that the women as well as the men were prophesying and praying during these public assemblies.
- G. The setting of these public assemblies is debated (namely, is Paul referring to worship services).
1. As Paul specifically appears to limit the participation of women "in the churches" in I Corinthians 14:34, some suggest this passage must be

directed to situations in which more than one person of the congregation is gathered together (e.g. praying with and/or for other people in public) but not the worship services. Both praying and prophesying were probably considered spiritual gifts (prophesy certainly was) and those gifts were given for the benefit of others (I Corinthians 14:3, 6). One could argue that Paul refers to the practice of spiritual gifts (which some believe are no longer applicable today) and therefore I Timothy 2:11, 12 and I Corinthians 14:34 take precedence. Women should remain silent during the public assemblies of the church.

2. Others suggest that Paul is clearly referring to public worship. Paul follows this passage with specific instructions regarding the Lord's supper (11:17 – 34). They argue from this passage indirectly that women were praying and prophesying during the worship services and therefore such activities are appropriate for women today
3. Still others could argue that women prayed and prophesied only in the presence of other women. Therefore the setting was that of women only. If this were the case, however, why would there be a need for a head covering?
4. Whatever the setting, the issue was proper dress or hairstyle in this passage, not the silence of women in the assembly.

IV. Application of I Corinthians 11:2 – 16.

- A. Few today argue (whether conservative or liberal) that this passage literally instructs women today to wear veils or a head covering during the public assembly of the church (or to prescribe a particular hair style). In fact, the more conservative and more liberal interpretations both instruct women to dress properly for worship, specifically not to dress to draw attention to themselves (see I Timothy 2) and to not challenge societal norms regarding dress.
 1. Some women feel it appropriate to wear a head covering (usually a hat) during worship and for these women wearing a hat is the right thing to do.
 2. Most women do not feel they need to wear a hat to express their reverence to God during worship and to maintain societal norms.
 3. At present, societal norms do not either prescribe or proscribe wearing a hat, so the choice is with the woman.
- B. The main debate regarding this passage relates to the reference to the created order. We discussed this issue previously in Session 6.
- C. A second area of debate regards whether women should pray and prophesy during worship. This passage only indirectly alludes to these activities, yet we may conclude:
 1. In whatever public assemblies to which Paul is referring, these women were praying and prophesying.

2. The passage is tied to spiritual gifts which may have been present and active among the Christians in Corinth but which may not be active today (a better argument for prophesying than praying).
 3. This passage is difficult to reconcile with I Corinthians 14:34 and I Timothy 2:11, 12.
 4. Whether this passage can be generalized to women praying (and perhaps prophesying, that is, teaching) in the public assemblies will depend upon the interpretation of the other passages as general or specific to situations in Corinth and Ephesus.
- D. The major lesson from Paul to us is probably found in I Corinthians 10:32, 33 and especially in I Corinthians 13.

References

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