

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

by Rev. Tom Aicken

In 1 Cor. 9:19-23 the apostle Paul writes that he has become all things to all men, that he might by all means save some. This, as he makes clear, was one of the leading principles of his life and ministry, and it was something, too, that made him so effective in reaching out to others with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This didn't mean, of course, that he took on worldly ways or that he compromised in any manner the message of Christ and Him crucified. But it did mean that he was prepared to take on to some degree the dress, manner and culture of the people around him, to identify with them to the extent that he could without breaking any of God's commands, and he did so in order that they, in turn, could relate to him and would be encouraged to receive his preaching.

Just two chapters over, in 1 Cor. 11:2-16, we see an example of Paul instructing others to follow this same principle of fitting-in whenever, wherever and however it's appropriate to do so. To some, what this passage is about is little more than women wearing hats in church, that this is a universal principle, as they tell us, for all women everywhere and at all times. I believe that this is, sadly, a misunderstanding of these verses, one that fails to appreciate the principle introduced earlier and is here given practical application for all church members. I submit that the real subject here, as we see from v. 3, is not head coverings (whether hats or veils), but male headship, and, that being the case, Christians should serve the Lord by dressing in a manner which distinguishes their gender, demonstrates the God-ordained order of male headship, and (let's not leave this out) they should do so according to culturally accepted customs of their time and place in order not to turn others away unnecessarily. Seeking to draw people to Christ should be a key principle of life for Christians today, too, and we should be as conscious of it everywhere we go as Paul himself was.

Women in ancient Corinth wore veils, and they would put one on every time they left home to walk about in public. Hence, if this is what those Corinthian women did in public, and to show respect for male headship and gender distinction in doing so, then this was what every Christian woman living in that community should have done in church as well. To have done otherwise would have been a sign of rebellion. Women who lived elsewhere may have distinguished their

gender and role in some other modest and respectful fashion, but this was the Corinthian practice and it made a statement understood by all who lived there at that time. This may seem like a small issue in itself – and we may wonder how much it really would have mattered – but, as I hope to point out, it addressed male headship and ran counter therefore to gender uniformity, gender fluidity, transgenderism and every other cover-up of complementary roles as dictated by God Himself. These gender topics are important moral subjects which have become some of the most pressing and controversial issues of our own day. Let's pay them careful attention.

Let's begin by taking a close look at 1 Cor. 11:3. This is the text which states succinctly the theme of the entire passage. Paul wants us to know the three headships listed here, particularly the headship of the man over the woman, and, coming out of that, the difference of dress code and general appearance that it lays down for both men and women. This is the sum and substance of the verses before us, the fact that the woman is to be subject to the man and that this clear gender distinction is to be visibly displayed so that there is no confusion between male and female. A man should look like a man wherever he goes, in other words, and a woman should look like a woman. We should never be left wondering if anyone could be either one or the other.

This principle of male headship doesn't deny the equality of men and women (see Gen. 1:27; Gal. 3:26-29), nor does it deny their mutual dependence (1 Cor. 11:11,12). We know, for instance, that the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are of one substance, equal in power and glory, yet just as the Son submitted Himself to the will of the Father when He became a man, so, too, in this present life men and women have very different yet complementary roles to fulfill. The woman is to be subject to the man (1 Tim. 2:11-15), and she serves Christ best when she commits to that complementary function.

Let's consider then the matter of the woman's appearance, how she should distinguish herself from her male counterpart in order to avoid confusion, and, at the same time, to show due respect for her God-appointed role in doing so. Charles Hodge wrote in 1857, "The principle insisted upon in this paragraph is that women should conform in matters of dress to all those usages which the public sentiment of the community in which they live demands. The veil in all eastern

countries was, and to a great extent still is, the symbol of modesty and subjection. For a woman therefore in Corinth to discard the veil was to renounce her claim to modesty, and to refuse to recognize her subordination to her husband.” (See Hodge’s commentary on the Corinthian Letters.)

Note the point that is being made here. Women dress in different ways all over the world, and how they dress here in North America – what respect for order they show in doing so, and what that says to other people of their own culture – may differ widely from how they dress and what that says to people living somewhere in another part of the world. We don’t all have to dress today, in other words, as they did two millennia ago in a landscape and culture far removed from our own. In first-century Corinth, for example, immodest women were shaved as a punishment, and so, if a woman refused to wear her veil, it was the same as being shorn; it was a way of her proclaiming to all the people around her that she was a loose woman who didn’t care about norms and customs and showing respect for other people. Today, if we were to see a woman who appeared shorn, we would probably take that as evidence of chemotherapy rather than of character. Nevertheless, how she dresses and appears to others still makes an important statement to everyone round her.

Note also that a man is not to wear a veil, or any attire deemed appropriate only for a woman, and that’s true for the same reason, for the statement it makes to others. His wearing a veil would tell people that he doesn’t care about gender distinction, that he’s willing to behave shamefully before both God and his fellow man. The real point here, though, is not in the clothing itself, but in what it tells others of that same time and culture what he thinks of male headship and his attitude for or against God’s own order. Today, if we see a man dressed in ‘drag’, for instance, is it not a profound declaration, loud and clear, of what he thinks of God Himself?

This passage, therefore, 1 Cor. 11:2-16, is clearly not just about how we should dress for church. Remembering the key principle of v.3, it’s about honouring the Lord and respecting the distinct roles God has given men and women wherever we go. If Paul mentions someone dressing with total disregard for corporate worship, which is to say how he or she will appear in the company of angels (see Heb. 12:22-24), the point of that is simply to show how much more disrespectful it

is to God Himself for anyone to do that even in the sabbath assembly. It's shameful and humiliating also to the angels into whose very presence such a person has entered (v. 10).

I should point out also that, while Paul rebukes the woman who fails to dress in appropriate attire (v. 5), he is not thereby giving approval to her praying aloud and prophesying (literally, preaching) in corporate worship. Disapproving of her apparel does not mean that God approves of her leading in services of worship. Clearly, both practices are forbidden and for the same reason, that both defy the principle of male headship.

For those who think that this passage is all about women covering their heads with hats or their faces with veils in church, and how we must never abandon that practice, it's surely noteworthy that veils are not even mentioned in vv. 13-16. That's right. Paul has moved on to something else. Now the imagery shifts to the woman's long hair as her covering. What's this?? Well, as I mentioned earlier, this passage is not first of all about veils at all, but about the headship of men over women and how it's to be expressed, not merely in words and works, but even in visible appearance. Veils were an eastern custom which were appropriate to that part of the world; the woman's long hair was more universally acknowledged, at that time and still today, and is a custom we can relate to more readily also here in the west. Her long hair *is* her covering (v. 15).

Think about this. Paul appeals to his readers to make a judgment for themselves in these matters (vv. 13, 14), a judgment based not on inspired Scripture, notice, but on nature. Clearly, he's asking them to decide whether it's right for a woman to have longer hair than a man. Is longer hair not a mark of her beauty, something that sets her apart and one of her most distinguishing features? This judgment doesn't have the same weight of Holy Scripture, of course, but some things are plain enough even to common sense and reason, and that's the whole point here.

Paul concludes the passage as he began by making reference to tradition and custom. What is important to point out here is that tradition is not necessarily bad (v.2), and that it's not necessarily good either (see Mark 7:6-13), and so every tradition needs to be tested carefully (1 Thess. 5:21, 22). We are so used to our own customary ways that we tend to take them all for granted, and to gloss over

them as if they never required any consideration, but every tradition we have needs to be consistent with what the Scriptures actually teach (2 Tim. 3:16, 17) and examined carefully in the context of what we find in that teaching. Hence, any study of 1 Corinthians 11 should not dismiss its connection with chapter 9. Dress codes, clearly, are not to be contrary to the Word of God. We understand that. Ah, but there are no universal dress codes in the Bible apart from dressing modestly (1 Tim. 2:9) and the prohibition, as we might now expect, of cross-dressing (Deut. 22:5).

Let me draw your attention to the custom referenced in v.16 of the passage before us, “But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.” Paul is not saying that churches have no custom to be contentious – regrettably, too many of them did have such a custom, especially this church in Corinth! What he’s advocating, rather, is length of hair and local dress for gender distinction, and is pointing out that, while some disgruntled folk may disagree with this principle for reasons that only they could conceive, both the apostles and all the churches of God fully accept it.

I want to conclude this paper with a call to being sensitive in a three-fold way, and, however contradictory these points may appear to be to one another (superficially, at least), we dare not overlook or undermine any one of them. (1) As Christians, we need to be considerate of unbelievers all around us. It was one thing in the 1950’s to tell women to wear a hat in church because that’s what women did on all formal occasions anyway. They wore hats. But in the 2020’s, when it’s no longer our custom for women to do so, it’s adding an unnecessary burden to many and, in great measure, closing the door to effective outreach into the community all around us. Do we really want to do that, to appear cult-like before the eyes of a watching world and so drive people away, and is it not contrary to the principle so eloquently laid out by the apostle in 1 Cor. 9:22?

Consider with me Matthew 23. One of two things Jesus condemns in this chapter is the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, but the other thing He condemns is their binding heavy and altogether unnecessary burdens on others (Matt. 23:4). Let’s search the Scriptures carefully, therefore, and make certain that we don’t do that ourselves. Let’s not oppose the prevailing culture where there is no need to do that or make anyone’s burden heavier than the gospel itself requires. This was

a principle appreciated by William Burns and Hudson Taylor, both missionaries to China in the 1800's. By fitting-in rather than standing apart they found the native people to be far more responsive to the message they preached. Taylor even sported the pigtail which was still in style for Chinese men at that time.

(2) As Christians, beloved, we need to be sensitive to one another as well, and especially to the weaker brothers within our own fellowship. In Rom. 14:1-13 Paul writes of how one believer esteems one day above another – (this is not the sabbath day but a reference to the ceremonial law, and today we might add to that what some deem to be special days of the church calendar) – whereas, he goes on, another believer esteems every day alike. The apostle acknowledges that this is a non-essential matter, that as long as each is acting in good faith (doing what he believes is right for him, not opposing his own conscience) then both are right to act as they do, that neither one should judge the other nor place any stumbling block in his brother's way.

This is a point that is too often forgotten in our day, and it applies to the very issue before us. If one woman is convicted that she should wear a hat in church – to be precise, a veil (not a hat) to provide a partial covering for her face – and another woman isn't so convinced, let it be remembered that this, too, is a non-essential matter. As long as each is acting in good faith both are right to act as they do; they should accept one another and not place any cause to fall in her sister's way.

(3) As Christians, we need above all else to be sensitive and wholly committed to the ways of the Lord. In our day, when the LGBTQ agenda is being thrust upon us, when sexual orientation and gender identification is written into the school curriculum for young children, when young teens suffering from gender dysphoria are receiving surgery and hormone therapy (and no one is allowed to counsel them against it – not even their parents), when anyone who dares to oppose such indoctrination and barbaric butchery is charged with being hateful and is incarcerated, the Church needs to redirect society's attention once again to the fact that God Himself has made us male and female, that there are no other genders, that the male as the head is to protect and provide for the female, that the female in turn is to support the male and be his helper comparable to him, and that any distortion of this God-ordained order is to call down the wrath and judgment of our righteous Judge to whom we must all give an account.