

Prologue

Paul Teaches the Corinthian Church About Women's Headcoverings!



Paul dictating to Tertius the Letter to the Romans.
Etching by Jan Luyken (1649-1712)

Paul is dictating a letter to be sent to the Corinthians. One of his many aims is to persuade them about the need for women to veil their heads when praying or prophesying in meetings of the church. He does this in 1 Cor. 11:2-16.

Paul knows that there are two “risks” associated with women praying and/or prophesying in this public way.

To understand the first of these it is necessary to bear in mind that, based on biblical creation principles, women characteristically “represent” men.

This is paradigmatically seen in the case of wives and husbands, but there is a more general “ordering of creation” principle at work here. Thus, when a woman prays or prophesies in the church meeting, she is seen to be representing the man and thereby bringing glory to him. Except that she doesn’t! Like everything else in church, the aim is to bring glory to God, and exalting man in the presence of God actually brings shame, before God and the congregation, both to the woman doing the praying/prophesying and to the man who has been inappropriately “elevated” when God alone should be elevated and glorified. Inappropriate honour equals shame: the woman, and man who she is “promoting”, are exposed in the holy and glorious presence of God.

What is the solution? Well, praying and prophesying are good, and Paul doesn’t want to stop these good activities. Paul’s solution is for the woman to indicate in some way that she is not, at this particular time, intending to promote the interests of man. This is done by veiling the woman’s head—which symbolically and metaphorically represents the man, who is the head of the woman. Man is (temporarily) covered, God alone is glorified and the problem is solved—to everyone’s satisfaction, including those guardians of the created order, the angels.

That was a bit involved! The second “risk” is simpler. A woman also represents herself, and when she prays to God in the public meetings of the church, this is a tremendous privilege, and it brings glory to her. Except that it doesn’t! When she prays to God in this public way, she is “on display” before God and the congregation at a time when God alone should be glorified, and once again, inappropriate honour equals shame, or perhaps shame is a bit too strong a word—let’s say it’s inappropriate or “not fitting” - that’s the word Paul uses anyway.

(I think it’s a lesser “risk” than the first one, since the prayer itself to God is a good action in this second scenario, and it is only the honour of “being on display” and being seen in a good light before God and the congregation that is the problem. This contrasts with the first risk when i) not only is man inappropriately elevated but ii) it is the actual action of praying/prophesying that brings this about—it is doubly wrong!)

Anyway, what is Paul’s solution to the second problem? Paul’s solution is not to stop the woman praying—prayer is good! The solution is for the woman publicly to display modesty and thereby show that, whilst she is aware of her privilege, she is taking pains to avoid drawing attention to herself, and the way she is to do this is to use the time-honoured way for a woman to display modesty in public, and, once again, to veil herself when

she is praying.

Well, that, in a nutshell, is what Paul wishes to achieve!

How does clever and crafty Paul go about this? Let's listen in!

“Hmm, is there anything that I can use as an illustration to drive the message home? Let's think. Praying and prophesying are good, but they have two risks—at one extreme, the woman's head, i.e. the man, her metaphorical head, (and, let us assume by virtue of this metaphorical sense, also the woman herself, centred on her physical head) is exposed before God and the congregation and that produces shame. At the other extreme, the privilege elevates the woman and that is inappropriate before God and the congregation. If the woman can avoid these two extremes by veiling, then everything is fine!

Hmm! I'm looking for a good illustration here! What else is good, but can be taken to extremes either of exposing the woman's head in public or elevating and glorifying the woman in public, and both extremes are cured by veiling? Aha!

Yes, of course it's hair! There are two “hair” extremes that correspond perfectly to the two risks when praying and prophesying.

If the woman's hair is absent, then the woman's head is inappropriately exposed in public, and the result is shame for the woman, centred on her head. The cure? Veiling the head!! (This exactly corresponds to the first risk!)

If, at the other extreme, a woman has wonderful long or coiffured hair, then that elevates the woman and brings glory to her in public—which of course is inappropriate since women are the representatives and repositories of shame (in its good sense—i.e. the opposite of being shameless!) and once again the solution is veiling when in public! (This corresponds to the second risk!)

I need to get all this written down!! And while I'm doing it. I'll make sure I use two words for lack of hair—shaved and shorn—to correspond to prayer and prophesy for the first illustration, and I'll only use one for glorious hair—*kome*—to correspond to prayer for the second illustration. Yes, that'll do nicely. I'll tie it all together in three sections. The first two will deal with the first risk which jointly involves the man and the woman, and just one section for the second risk since only the woman is

involved. Hmm, I think this calls for a neat little chiastic structure, I'll also include a contrast between the situations of men and women when it comes to praying/prophesying and hair length, and I'll make sure I get the word counts right!

Perhaps I need a little slogan for this! How about "For prayer, think hair!"? Hmm, a bit obvious but never mind!

Now, I need an amanuensis! Sosthenes, are you busy?!"



Well, that's a little glimpse ahead into the general direction of travel! I hope you will join me and we can journey together!! S.F.

