

1 Corinthians 11: 2-16
Session 13– Study Notes
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1. 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16 is about what is on top of men's and women's heads (hairstyles or head coverings) while they engage in speaking ministries in church meetings, and this is connected negatively to shame and disgrace (*kataischunō*) and positively to glory (*doxa*).
2. The Greek word *doxa* is often translated as “glory” in the New Testament, but it can also have the sense of “repute.”
3. Several verses in both the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament state that women and men bear the image and glory of God.

(Long hair on men and short or unbound hair on women was socially suspect in the Roman world.)

4. Anyone who thinks they can use these verses to “prove” that women need some sort of covering from a man to lead, minister, or serve in the church is basing their argument on impossible grounds. There is no “proof.”
5. The text is too convoluted and too conflicted to prove anything; this is something most scholars can agree upon unless they are proof-texting, which means looking for interpretations that support their worldview.
6. Paul's argument is notoriously obscure, so obscure that it is not even included in the preaching lectionary, partly because scholars do not know precisely how to interpret some of the key terms in the argument.
7. The key terms have multiple meanings, depending on context, and at times, are only used once, here, in this text, which doesn't provide the linguistic clues needed to interpret accurately. Some of these terms include
 - Head
 - Uncovered
 - Glory
 - Authority over her head
 - Because of the angels
 - In the place of a shawl
 - Such a custom
 - Man and woman (could equally mean husband and wife)
8. In view of the uncertainty surrounding these matters, it is impossible to give a fully confident interpretation of the passage. It is possible, however, to identify some things that are clear about Paul's argument.
 - Paul endorses the freedom of women to pray and prophesy in the assembly; the only question is what type of headdress is appropriate for them while exercising this freedom.
 - The patriarchal order of verses 3 and 7-9 is set in counterpoint with a vision of the mutual interdependence of men and women in the Lord.
 - The passage does not require the subordination of women -even though some of Paul's arguments presuppose a hierarchical ordering – but rather a symbolic distinction between the sexes.
 - The immediate concern of the passage is for the Corinthians to avoid bringing shame on the community.

9. The Bible doesn't give us a uniform set of data from which to extrapolate a hard and fast rule or a rigid protocol for men and women. In fact, we have a set of data that sometimes baffles us, but it invites us to dig deep and explore more.
10. The people who think that Paul really did prohibit women from full participation in the early church need to explain away the catalog of evidence that says he did not.
- 11. Paul's concern in this passage concerns socially respectable hairstyles, or head coverings, for the Corinthian men and women praying and prophesying aloud in church meetings. All of his statements in this passage must be understood with this overriding concern in mind.**
12. Paul begins with a statement about status, or prominence, which he ties to the idea of origins or "firstness."
"Now I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor. 11:3 1 Cor. 8:6).
13. In English, the word "head" can sometimes mean "a person in authority over others," but the Greek word that Paul used, *kephalē* ("head"), did not typically have this meaning in ancient Greek: 1 Corinthians 11:3 is **not about authority**, let alone a hierarchy of authority.
14. In the first century, men had a higher level of honor and prominence than women. Furthermore, because of the honor-shame dynamic in the ancient world, it could be more difficult for a woman to have her own honor. Rather, her honor was embedded in the honor of a male relative. This dynamic is the backdrop to 1 Corinthians 11:2–16.
15. Considering scholastic evidence, there is a reading of Paul that paints a consistent picture of Paul the Apostle as a man, friend of women, radical theologian, and visionary.
16. This reading creates the position that Paul was faced with a group of domineering, gifted men who had implemented oppressive practices for women in Paul's absence. They constructed a theology to support their practices that blended Paul's original thought and their own distorted view of the world.
17. The Corinthian church was dominated by a group of gifted and highly articulate teachers who were both overbearing and divisive. These based their assumptions on the second Creation story and ignored the first. In our first story, God makes male and female in his own image, not just man.
18. The Corinthians were teaching that women had a secondary place in the creation order, deriving their glory not directly from Christ but from man.
19. **In the ancient Near East, Mesopotamia, and the Greco-Roman world, it was customary for women to cover their hair when they went outside.** In **Isaiah 3:17**, the unveiling of a woman's hair is considered a form of punishment and humiliation.
- 20. In first-century Corinth, it was common to shave the heads of slaves and convicted adulteresses, which made the nazi practice of shaving Jewish women's heads all the more humiliating.**
21. **The main concern for these leaders was the shame that they would experience in society if the women among them did not adhere to cultural proprieties.**
22. **1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is about reputation (*doxa*) and about not giving messengers a bad report to bring back to others who were curious about what was happening in Christian gatherings in Corinth.**

23. Verse 10 is at the center of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, which is structured as a chiasm. Verse 10 is Paul’s main point. He wanted the ministering women to exercise sound judgment and have respectable hairstyles or head coverings so that messengers wouldn’t spread damaging reports about the conduct of women in the church. *(Note that Paul doesn’t say or hint that women shouldn’t be praying or prophesying.)*
24. The Greek word *aggeloi*, which occurs in 1 Corinthians 11:10, commonly means messengers. In some contexts, *aggeloi* are heavenly messengers, angels, but at other times, they are human messengers running an errand.
25. In the first half of the chiasm, Paul presents his argument using a hierarchy of status or honor (based on “firstness”) that the first-century Corinthians could relate to. Paul wanted the Corinthians to heed this dynamic for the sake of outsiders, but he did not want them to take it too far.
26. There is no hierarchy between men and women who are “in the Lord.” Nevertheless, because of the messengers and for the sake of reputations, **Paul wanted the men and women who were praying and prophesying to have hairstyles or head coverings that were socially acceptable in first-century Corinthian society and would promote the message of the Gospel as the important topic rather than the hairstyles.**

REFLECTIONS

1. Paul was primarily worried about the reputation of the church. Why was this so critical for him?
2. What kind of issues threaten the reputation of the church today?
3. What type of cultural issues do you see in the world today that are instrumental in the oppression of women?
4. What might be some reasons for hair to play such a significant role in gender identification?
5. Hair was a pivotal issue in the 60’s. What is your recollection of the attitudes and your own attitude towards gender-bending hairstyles? Why was the length of hair such an important issue?
6. What are some modern-day exterior choices that you feel judgmental towards and why?
 - Tattoos
 - Piercings
 - Clothing
 - Hair
 - Other

RESOURCES

1. First Corinthians, Interpretation, Richard B. Hays
2. First Corinthians, New Covenant Commentary, B. J. Oropeza
3. First Letter to the Corinthians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Roy E. Ciampa and Brian Rosner
4. Feasting on the Word, David Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor Editors
5. Unveiling Paul’s Women, Lucy Peppia

What is a Chiasm? (See 1 Corinthians 11: 10)

Chiasm (*also sometimes called chiasmus or a chiastic structure*) gets its name from the Greek letter *Chi*, which looks like our letter “X.”

A chiasm is a literary technique that presents a concept and then repeats it back in reverse order.

The typical structure is like a sandwich where you have parallel lines that repeat, echo, or explain each other as it builds to a key focal point in the passage. For example, Proverbs 6:16–19 tells us:

- There are six things which the LORD hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:
 - 1a) **Haughty eyes,**
 - 2a) **a lying tongue,**
 - 3a) **And hands that shed innocent blood,**
 - (KEY FOCUS) **A heart that devises wicked plans,**
 - 3b) **Feet that run rapidly to evil,**
 - 2b) **A false witness who utters lies,**
 - 1b) **And one who spreads [sows] strife among brothers.**

Notice how 1a and 1b expand on each other (the exact haughty nature that is full of arrogance and disdain is the same that spreads strife). 2a (lying tongue) and 2b (uttering lies and a false witness) parallel each other. 3a and 3b deal with hands and feet.

The focal point of the passage summarizes each line: a heart that devises wicked plans—pride, lies, and evil are produced from a wicked heart. And these are all things God hates.

Such chiasms are found all throughout Scripture and can range from a single sentence (i.e., Mark 2:27) to the structure of entire books (i.e., the book of Ruth).