

The Church of the Servant King

www.cotsk.org

Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

(SB_1Cor_chp11)

HEAD COVERINGS (1 COR 11:2-16)

2 Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. 4 Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. 5 But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. 6 For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. 7 For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. 8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; 9 for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. 10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12 For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. 13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

The *traditions* were the central truths of the Christian faith, passed on at this point in the 1st Century A.D. (before the emergence of Christian literature) orally and by example from evangelist and teacher to convert. An example of Paul’s “traditions” that were taught:

6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; 9 not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. (2 Thess 3:6-10)

In verse 3, Paul introduces the subject at issue with a succinct summary of the principle at stake – “*I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.*” Throughout verses 3-16, it is clear that this is the underlying principle of order to be observed and respected regardless of the cultural context within which a local church exists. Paul then develops this principle’s application in view of the specifics of the cultural situation in Corinth during the 1st Century A.D.

Paul is stating a principle relative to any woman who was in a relationship to a man such as a wife to a husband or a daughter to a father. Paul did not mean every woman universally should be under the administrative authority of men universally. That is a complete distortion and as a distortion, it is a principle found in false religions. Paul is emphasizing the administrative order that should characterize the relationship between a man and a woman who have a familial connection. Even amongst the Triune Godhead, there is administrative authority present.¹ However, the comparison is certainly not meant to be so literally applied that the subordination is to the same degree of completeness as is the case within the Trinity – a point supported by the fact that Paul highlights the mutual interdependence that exists between the man and woman (husband and wife by interpretation) in verses 12-13 – *“However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.”*

Some have understood Paul to be teaching principles relating to how a woman should dress in a local church assembly meeting, i.e. with a veil or covering on her head. Others have understood Paul to be referring to the hair of the woman – and the man too for that matter.

Historical evidence attests to the fact that Greek women did appear in public without a head covering as is evident from ancient Greek vase paintings. The general practice within the ancient orient however was that when a woman was amongst strangers, she would be veiled, but when amongst friends and relatives, she would be unveiled. Evidently, when Christian women assembled with men for a worship service, they wore some type of veil or head covering similar to a shawl that covered the head like a hood.²

Evidently, women as well as men could pray aloud and even prophesy (i.e. forthtell and foretell) within the context of the local assembly (verses 4-5a – *“Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head”*). Since this was a practice unique to the temporary nature of the spiritual gift of prophecy or prophesying (1 Cor 12:9) there was a divine order to be observed so that God would be glorified – not the individual. The Corinthians had a “carnal” mindset on a number of matters and virtually the entire letter to the Corinthians is devoted to contrasting their “carnal” thinking and behaviors with that which is truly “spiritual.” Thinking they were demonstrating their newfound liberty in Christ, evidently some of these women had begun to appear at the local assembly meetings with their head uncovered and with their loose hair exposed – something that carried an entirely different connotation in Greek culture – that of an adulteress.³ This was dishonoring her husband or father and was causing disorder and distraction in the local assembly. It was symbolic of a lack of humility since the woman was causing the focus of attention to be drawn to herself in entirely the wrong way. In contrast, by allowing others to observe her honoring her husband or father as dictated by the norms of the culture, she would have brought focus upon the submission of the Son to the Father.

In Paul’s analogy, the woman who refused to wear a covering in the local assembly was doing something as disruptive and distracting as the woman who showed up with a shaved head – *“for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. 6 For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her*

¹ The fact that Paul uses the Triune Godhead and the order of authority that exists therein as his point of comparison seems to me to argue in favor of the view that Paul is using the word “head” (Gr. *kephale* – κεφαλη) to refer to “authority,” not just “origin” – another acceptable interpretation of the word.

² Frank E. Gaebelien, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, general editor, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976-1992), electronic edition; Thomas Constable, “Notes on the Book of 1 Corinthians” at www.soniclight.com; and David K. Lowrey, “1 Corinthians” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books – a division of Scripture Press, 1983), 529.

³ Ibid.

hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head." A woman with a shaved head in the Greco-Roman and Jewish world of the 1st Century meant one of two things: 1) a woman who was proven guilty of adultery had her hair cut off under Jewish Law (Num 5:11-31); or 2) a woman who shaved her head in Greco-Roman culture did so to appear as a man. The latter resulted in the blurring of the relationship between men and women, particularly the sexual distinctions. Men typically wore their hair short, and women wore theirs long. If a woman cut her hair short, it indicated that she wanted to take the place of a man.⁴

The man was not to cover his head since his direct authority was the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 7a) – *"For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God."* Paul begins to develop the logic of God's orderly arrangement by reflecting upon the Genesis account. The Genesis account reflects a co-dominion over creation on the part of the man and the woman (Gen 1:26-27), yet it also reflects the origins of an authority structure based upon the order of creation of man and woman (Gen 2:18-24). Paul will build upon the order contained in the Genesis account as he develops the remainder of his argument in the verses to follow.

26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." 27 God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Gen 1:26-27)

18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." 19 Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

23 The man said,
"This is now bone of my bones,
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman,
Because she was taken out of Man."

24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. (Gen 2:18-24)

Verses 7b-12 – *"but the woman is the glory of man. 8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; 9 for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. 10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12 For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God."*

The point here is that if the woman abandons the complementary role to the man in God's orderly arrangement, then she has abandoned God's design for her to bring honor to Him. This entire orderly arrangement is designed for the purpose of God being honored. Humility on the man and the woman's part is needed to set aside any interest in self-glorification or undue focus upon self-interest and approbation. The woman's authority or power resides in submission to God's order just as the man's authority or power resides in submission to God's order. Paul also captures the fact that in order for a man and woman who are in a familial relationship to

⁴ Thomas Constable, "Notes on the Book of 1 Corinthians" at www.soniclight.com

glorify God, there is a mutual interdependence that exists between them – a commonality of objectives and goals in life that drive them both. In verses 11-12, Paul highlights this interdependence.

Angelic creation observes human history and the lives of believers as object lessons within the context of a greater argument. That greater argument is the appeal trial of Satan. Paul alludes to that greater context in these verses and other passages also make reference to that greater context as well.

10 So that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. (Eph 3:10)

21 I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. (1 Tim 5:21)

10 As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, 11 seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. 12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven--things into which angels long to look. (1 Pet 1:10-12)

14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation? (Heb 1:14)

Verses 13-16 – “*Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.*”

In these verses, Paul tries to bolster his argument with an example from nature or the common experiential observation of his hearers. In general, men had shorter hair than women. There may have been certain exceptions among certain tribes outside of the mainstream of Greek culture, but within Greek culture, that was the norm. To deliberately defy the norm was tantamount to a personal rebellion by the individual. Such rebellion within the Christian community was a sign of contentiousness – something that seemed to be a problem among the Corinthians given their propensity toward sectarianism and promotion of self-interests.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16⁵

The principles Paul presents here that are to govern the church and individual Christians in their life and conduct are as follows:

1. Christians should live as individuals and in corporate worship in the light of the perfect unity and interrelatedness of the persons of the Godhead. The Father and the Son are perfectly united (John 10:30) and yet there is a difference administratively: God is the head of Christ (1Cor 11:3). So Christians are one, but they too have to be administratively subordinate to one another.
2. Christians are to remember that God first created man, then woman (Gen 2:21-23) and placed the man as administrative head over the woman and the woman as his helper-companion (Gen

⁵ Taken from Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*.

2:18). So in the Christian community, the man is to conduct himself as a man (1Cor 11:4) and as the head of the woman (v. 3), while the woman is to conduct herself as woman with dignity without doing anything that would bring dishonor to her (v. 5).

3. Since Christians live in the Christian community of the home and that of the church, they are to remember that God has established the man and the woman as equal human beings: "As woman came from man, so also man is born of woman" (v. 12). So in the Christian community believers should treat one another with mutual respect and admiration as they realize each other's God-given special functions and positions.

4. Christian men and women should remember that, though God has made them equal human beings, yet he has made them distinct sexes. That distinction is not to be blurred in their realization that they are mutually dependent (v. 11)--the man on the woman and the woman on the man. It is also to be observed in their physical appearance (vv. 13-15), so that in worship the woman can be recognized as woman and the man as man.

5. God is a God of order. This means order in worship and peaceful decorum in the church (v. 16). Therefore Christian men and women should conduct themselves in a respectful, orderly way not only in worship but also in daily life.