

# 1 CORINTHIANS 11.1-16

## The Principle of Headship

**Intro:** Having addressed their questions regarding marriage (chapter 7) and meat sacrificed to idols (chapters 8-10), Paul moves on to another issue the Corinthian Christians had inquired about: the covering. Actually, it may be unfair to say that their question was regarding the covering, for the covering is not the main issue of this chapter. Rather, principles of headship and how that is expressed by men and women would seem to be the main issue, the covering being related to that main issue.

Regarding the covering, Paul's teaching in this passage is relatively plain: men should not cover their heads when praying or prophesying, women should (vss. 4-5). However, significant questions remain. First, why does Paul give this instruction? Second, are these instructions binding today? In this lesson we will first examine what Paul says in the text, then look to make application to today. But, before we begin let us be cautious of the attitude we bring into this study. A sister in Christ should not approach this passage with her mind already determined that she won't wear the covering, refusing to wear any sign of submission. She will find principles in this passage that rebuke such an attitude. Likewise, a brother in Christ should not think this passage will "put a woman in her place." He will find principles in this passage that rebuke such an attitude.

### VS. 2, OPENING COMMENDATION

1. Paul begins this passage by praising them, an unusual occurrence in the letter. Some believe that Paul was being sarcastic, but I find no basis for this idea. It would seem that in this matter, Paul found reason to give them praise. You will note in vs. 17 that we reach another matter where Paul could not give them praise.
2. Paul's praise for them was that they took into consideration his teachings, inquired of him

regarding these issues. Yes, it would appear that some in Corinth did not have high regard for Paul (see 9.3), but others did respect him enough to seek his counsel and guidance.

3. What did Paul mean by traditions? A tradition is something handed down from one person to the next. We typically think of a tradition as being non-binding, but that is not how Paul used the term. In 1Cor 15.1-3, He will speak of the gospel as something they "received" and that he "delivered" to them. Those are the two components of a "tradition." Clearly, Paul was not saying the gospel was optional or non-binding. Paul will speak in other passages about the necessity of following "the traditions" (see 2Thess 2.15; 3.6). Paul had received his teachings from the Lord, he then delivered those teachings to the churches. They needed to follow these "traditions". (see Matt. 28.20)
4. However, it is clear that even though there was a willingness on the part of many to follow Paul's teaching in this matter, there was some confusion. While I cannot be certain, I believe that something like the following had taken place. Paul often spoke of unity in Christ, including the equality of men and women in Christ (Gal 3.26-29; cf. Eph. 4.4-6). It would seem that the Corinthians had taken this teaching to heart, appreciating the equality of men and women in the church. However, they may have taken the teaching too far, to a point where headship was no longer respected. So, Paul sought to correct their understanding in this passage.

### VSS. 3-10, THE PRINCIPLE OF HEADSHIP

1. As stated in the intro, this section plainly teaches that the Corinthian men should NOT pray or prophesy while covered and that the

Corinthian women should. But why? In a word: headship.

2. The idea of headship runs throughout this passage, centered on the following relationships:
    - » Christ and man (Christ is man's head)
    - » Man and woman (man is woman's head)
    - » Christ and God (God is Christ's head)
  3. But what does Paul mean by saying "head of"?
    - » First, he is NOT saying inferior. To take that meaning would be contrary to Gal. 3.26-29 and vss. 11-12 of this chapter.
    - » It seems best to think of preeminence or first position. For instance, every citizen in the US is "equal", yet we recognize the President as our "head". He is not naturally better than us, but his position is one of headship, one that all citizens are called to recognize.
    - » So, Christ is equal with God, yet Christ recognizes God as head (Phil. 2). In terms of manhood, Christ and man were equal, but Christ is clearly head. Man and woman are equal in Christ, but man is to be recognized as head.
  4. There are some important points in this passage that help us to see why this teaching was needed in Corinth.
    - » First, you had the situation where men and women were "praying or prophesying".
      - This was NOT in the assembly. It is significant that the assembly is mentioned in vss. 17,18, 20, but not here. A woman's conduct in the assembly is addressed in 14:34-36.
      - She is actively "praying or prophesying." She is doing the same thing as a man (vs. 4). These terms are never used passively, i.e. a woman listening to prophecy or to prayer. No, she was actively doing the praying or prophesying.
      - Both activities would seem to be some of the spiritual gifts mentioned later in the letter. Prophecy is inspired (12:10) and it is likely that prayer is as well (see 14:14-19).
    - » Second, it would seem that Greek / Co-
5. Vss. 7-10 again emphasize the necessity of respecting headship. However, further theological reasoning is given, namely creation.
    - » While both man and woman were created by God, man was first created from the very dust of the earth (Gen. 2.7). Thus, man is the image and glory of God. Paul states this is the reason man "ought not to have his head covered," (vs. 7).
    - » However, woman originated from man (Gen. 2.21-23). Thus, woman is the glory of man. Paul says this is the reason a woman "ought to have a symbol of authority on her head," (vs. 10).
    - » The final phrase, "because of the angels" is uncertain. However, it seems best that Paul is referencing the angels that did not respect God's authority and were therefore punished (Jude 6; 2Peter 2.4).

Corinthian customs played a part in Paul's instructions.

- In Greek culture, men typically pulled their toga over their head when making sacrifices. "Because of the clear association of this practice with pagan devotion, pulling the toga over the physical head in Christian worship would shame the spiritual head of the man, Christ." (Garland)
- In Corinthian culture, respectable women covered their heads when out in public. Furthermore, a woman guilty of adultery would have her head shaved as an act of public shame.
- Taking all of this into account, it would seem that these principles are meant to show headship in Corinthian culture. Men should not cover their heads, lest they dishonor their head (Christ) by mimicking pagan practices. Women should cover their heads, lest they dishonor their head (man) by doing something dishonorable in the local culture.

**VSS. 11-12, CAUTION TO NOT TAKE THIS TOO FAR**

1. Respecting headship is important. Not abusing headship is also important!
2. Man and woman may occupy different roles, but those roles are complementary. Neither is independent of the other (either in the family or in the church!)
3. Woman originally came from man, but ever since then man has come from woman! (vs. 12)
4. Furthermore, we all originate from God! Thus, the principle of equality in Christ is again affirmed (Gal 3.26-29).

### **VSS. 13-16, APPEAL THAT THEY JUDGE CORRECTLY**

1. Having given them information and instruction, Paul urges them to make the proper conclusion.
2. Vss. 14-15 provide a final piece of evidence that should be taken into consideration: nature itself! "When Paul speaks of "nature", he means what his society understands to be natural. Since male hair grows the same way as female hair does, he must be referring to hair that conforms to societal expectations concerning male and female hairdos. In general, it was dishonorable for men in this culture to have long hair." (Garland)
3. Recall that Paul had begun by praising them (vs. 2), and has now called on them judge for themselves (vs. 14). However, he recognizes that some might be contentious, not wanting abide by this teaching. So, as Paul has done before, he appeals to uniformity of doctrine and practice (see also 4.17; 7.17). What Paul had outlined in the text is the practice in the churches.

### **APPLICATION:**

1. Are women bound to wear the covering today?
  - » Simply put, no. I conclude this partly because cultural context today is not exactly the same (i.e. it is not inherently shameful for a woman to go out in public with her head uncovered).
  - » However, the main reason is that the same circumstances do not exist today. Paul was

not describing a woman in the assembly passively listening to a sermon or prayer. These were women with spiritual gifts, exercising their abilities to prophecy and pray outside of the assemblies. The same situation simply does not exist today.

- » But let us make sure we do not forget to respect the principle of headship, a principle that should be respected in every time and circumstance.
2. Apostolic Tradition & The Church
    - » This passage began by Paul praising them for respecting the "traditions" he gave them. Again, Paul's use of the term "tradition" stands for anything he "received" and then "delivered", including the very basics of the gospel (15.1-3).
    - » Regarding the covering, Paul gave them instructions they "ought" to follow (vss. 7,10). Ought does not mean optional, but necessary as in John 13.14; 1John 3.16; 4.11.
    - » Paul concluded the passage by saying he was uniform in his teaching and practice in the churches (vs. 16).
    - » People will sometimes talk about the essentials of the gospel (Christ's death, grace, faith, love, etc.) and nonessential teachings and practices. The list of nonessential items will vary depending on whom you talk to, but may include singing, Sunday observance of the Lord's Supper and even baptism. However, when giving guidance regarding the covering, Paul spoke of it as essential. He said his teaching on it was uniform.
    - » As I've already stated, the conditions today are not the same, so women are not bound to the covering. However, there's a larger point we should see. We would do very well to not quickly discount any New Testament teaching or practice as nonessential. Paul did not speak of them that way, nor did he instruct others to do so.