

Recognizing God's Authority Structure in the Church

1 Corinthians 11:1-16

1 Corinthians 11:1-16: *"Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. 2 Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. 5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. 6 For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. 7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man is not from woman, but woman from man. 9 Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. 10 For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. 12 For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God. 13 Judge among 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 anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God."*

Background Notes

Verse 1 is really the concluding verse of chapter 10, and many Bibles show that by some kind of separation or outline. When Paul said to imitate him, just as he also imitated Christ, he was urging the Corinthian Christians to follow the self-sacrificing attitude and example of Christ – just as Paul sought to do as a pattern for Christian living.

This was especially important in the proper use of Christian liberty, the subject of chapter 10. In Christian living it is so important to have the proper view of Christian liberty. Not recognizing our liberty in Christ can lead to a legalistic lifestyle, and this is unbiblical. And not restraining our Christian liberty can lead to license - weaker Christians are stumbled and others are offended. Therefore Paul said, *"Give no offense either to the Jews or to the Greeks, or to the church of God"*(10:32). Paul concluded his discussion of the proper use of Christian liberty with the last verse of chapter 10 and the first verse of chapter 11.

Notice by the way that "the Jews" and "the Church" are separate entities in this New Testament passage. The New Testament Church did not replace the Jewish nation. The Church is *not* the new Israel. Israel is Israel, throughout the Bible.

In verse 2 of chapter 11 Paul began a new subject - a discussion about public worship. It's obvious that Paul was starting a new section here because he began by telling the Corinthian believers that he praised them. Up to this point in the letter, Paul had not been *praising* the Corinthians – in fact, he had been *rebuking* them.

So a new section of the letter is obviously beginning here. Paul began the section by praising the Corinthians for remembering him in all things, and for keeping the traditions - the central teachings and doctrines of the Christian faith that Paul had taught them. But now some further instructions were needed in reference to public worship.

Doctrinal Points

1. Recognizing God's structure of authority in the Church brings glory to God.

What is God's structure of authority in the Church? It's given in verse 3: "*But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*" Starting at the top, the structure of authority in the Church begins with God the Father, then moves to Christ, the Head of the Church, then to man, and then to woman. Recognizing this structure of authority in doctrine and practice brings glory to God.

How do we practice God's authority structure in the church today? We do it first of all by distinguishing between the roles of men and women in the church. The Bible teaches that men are to be the elders and spiritual leaders in the Church, and men are to be the public preachers and teachers in the Church. Read 1 Timothy 2 in this connection.

We also practice God's structure of authority in the church today by the outward symbol of an inner attitude to bring glory to God. The New Testament Church uses several symbols in its practice. There is the symbol of water, used in baptism. There is the symbol of bread and wine, used in the Lord's Supper. And there is the symbol of head covering used in public worship, which is discussed here in the first half of chapter 11. Notice that verse 10 refers to the head covering as a symbol of authority.

Christians are not in agreement as to the exact interpretation of these verses. However, most Christians recognize that whatever interpretation one holds, the more critical doctrines (such as the Person and work of Christ, for example) are more crucial to the life and practice of the Church as the doctrine of the head covering.

However, if the spiritual leadership in a local church is convinced of a particular interpretation of these verses, individual members of that fellowship should respect and follow the view of their spiritual leaders.

There are basically four different views of the head covering within the evangelical church today:

a. The head covering was strictly cultural. In this view, head coverings were prescribed only for the church at Corinth, and have nothing to do with the Church today. In this view, there is no role distinction between men and women in the Church today.

Against this view would be 1 Timothy 2, that we just mentioned, and 11:16 that suggests that this custom is for all churches and is not limited to the 1st century.

Also against this view would be the fact that a creation argument is used in verses 8-9. Creation was before culture. In verse 10-11, notice that Paul emphasized that recognizing God's structure of authority, that God had ordained that women are to be subordinate to men in the Church, does **not** mean that women are inferior to men. No! The best example of this is that the Lord Jesus was submissive to God the Father - but not inferior.

b. The head covering was a cultural symbol for a trans-cultural principle. By "trans-cultural," we mean something that is not limited by a particular time and culture, but is good for all culture and times, including today. In this view, it's the principle of recognizing God's structure of authority that is important here: the *principle* is trans-cultural, but the *symbol* is not meant to be trans-cultural. The symbol is cultural, and *any* cultural symbol may be used. In this view, the symbol of a head covering was a symbol for the 1st century, just as wedding rings (and other things) are cultural symbols today.

Against this view is the fact that this symbol is linked to the woman's hair being her "glory" (v15). So that leads us to view #3.

c. The head covering is a trans-cultural symbol for a trans-cultural principle and the trans-cultural symbol is the covering of the hair. This view seems to be supported by verses 13-15, which emphasize that God has designed nature itself. The average woman has much more glorious hair than the average man. In this view, the hair itself is the head covering.

Against this view is the fact that a different Greek word is used for *covering* in verses 5-6 than the Greek word that is used for *covering* in verse 15, when referring to the hair. And verses 4-5 don't make sense if the hair is the head covering. Try reading verses 4-5, making the hair the head covering.

d. The head covering is a trans-cultural symbol for a trans-cultural principle, and the trans-cultural symbol is a covering in addition to the hair. This view is supported by the two different Greek words used for *covering* (as just mentioned), and the mention of the angels in verse 10. Angels cannot read a person's mind but they can read behavior.

In this view, a symbol other than long or short hair makes more sense, since even unbelieving women had long hair and unbelieving men had short hair in the 1st century. So in this view, the covering must be a distinct symbol other than hair, so that the angels will be able to observe that the church recognizes God's structure of authority.

Recognizing God's structure of authority in the Church brings glory to God.

2. Recognizing God's structure of authority in the Church brings glory to mankind.

Verse 7 says that man "*is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.*" The way God designed nature is that in the animal kingdom, the male generally has more "glory" in the various species - more brilliant colors in birds, for example. But in the human species, the woman is the glory of mankind, and that glory is focused in the woman's hair (v15). Not her legs, not her breasts, not her face, but her hair.

In the presence of God, in public worship, mankind should show reverence by symbolically covering mankind's glory. How does mankind do that? Not by the man wearing a head covering, because that would be covering God's glory (v7), but by the woman wearing a head covering - covering the glory of mankind in the presence of God. From God's perspective (as well as the angels), ignoring the symbol of the head covering in public worship detracts not only from God's glory, but also from mankind's glory.

Recognizing God's structure of authority in the Church brings glory to mankind.

Practical Application

Don't pull the "traditions" of verse 2 out of context!

Verse 2 once again: "*Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.*" The "traditions" that are mentioned here are the central teachings and doctrines of the Christian faith - the doctrinal truths that Paul had communicated to the Corinthians.

Paul was *not* speaking of the various "traditions" that have been built up over the years in many churches, and are now held as almost sacred - such as the order of services, and time of services, and the length of services. Some church traditions can be good, but there are many traditions that may not be helpful - and may not be worthwhile to keep. Those are not the "traditions" that Paul was discussing in 1 Corinthians 11:2!

So - don't pull the "traditions" of verse 2 out of context!