Women and Men and Order in the Assembly of the Saints

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 NLT

In our last reading in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, the apostle Paul closed by saying…

31 So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 32 Don’t give offense to Jews or Gentiles or the church of God. 33 I, too, try to please everyone in everything I do. I don’t just do what is best for me; I do what is best for others so that many may be saved.

1 Corinthians 10:31-33 NLT

And as we transition into chapter 11 it is clear that verse 1 belongs with chapter 10 when it says:

“1 And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.” This makes it clear that it is not just apostles, pastors, and officially recognized ministers who are called to live for God’s glory but believers of every stripe who are to do their best to do everything for the glory of God and salvation of others.

As we continue in chapter 11 we will see the approach of any good leader as they prepare people for instruction; Paul starts first with commendation and then transitions to correction. Please follow along with me as I read beginning with chapter 11, verse 2.

**2 I am so glad that you always keep me in your thoughts, and that you are following the teachings I passed on to you. 3 But there is one thing I want you to know: The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.**

**1 Corinthians 11:2-3 NLT**

Before I read any further I want to take a second to expand on the idea of what it means to be the head of something. In our culture if I tell someone I am the head pastor or the head of the engineering department it is presumed that you are the boss. But the Bible when talking about someone being the “head” of something is describing someone who is the loving source of leadership. Notice in Ephesians:

**22 God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church. 23 And the church is his body; it is made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with himself.**

**Ephesians 1:22-23 NLT**

Notice here that “God who is the head of Christ.” Gave Christ all authority. Being head is more about empowering than it is about bossing people around. Notice Ephesians 5:

**23 For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of his body, the church. 24 As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything.**

**25 For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her 26 to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God’s word.[b] 27 He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. 28 In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. 29 No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church. 30 And we are members of his body.**

**Ephesians 5:23-30 NLT**

I just wanted to share that small tidbit about headship before we move on here in 1 Corinthians 11.

**4 A man dishonors his head if he covers his head while praying or prophesying. 5 But a woman dishonors her head if she prays or prophesies without a covering on her head, for this is the same as shaving her head. 6 Yes, if she refuses to wear a head covering, she should cut off all her hair! But since it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut or her head shaved, she should wear a covering.**

**7 A man should not wear anything on his head when worshiping, for man is made in God’s image and reflects God’s glory. And woman reflects man’s glory. 8 For the first man didn’t come from woman, but the first woman came from man. 9 And man was not made for woman, but woman was made for man. 10 For this reason, and because the angels are watching, a woman should wear a covering on her head to show she is under authority.**

**11 But among the Lord’s people, women are not independent of men, and men are not independent of women. 12 For although the first woman came from man, every other man was born from a woman, and everything comes from God.**

**13 Judge for yourselves. Is it right for a woman to pray to God in public without covering her head? 14 Isn’t it obvious that it’s disgraceful for a man to have long hair? 15 And isn’t long hair a woman’s pride and joy? For it has been given to her as a covering. 16 But if anyone wants to argue about this, I simply say that we have no other custom than this, and neither do God’s other churches.**

**1 Corinthians 11:2-16 NLT**

This is a passage that can easily be misunderstood and misinterpreted even by the best of Bible teachers. In my opinion it is a “tread lightly” kind of teaching.

I will begin by saying that some of these teachings are cultural and some are universal. Just by looking out in this congregation, it would seem that few of you believe it is teaching that all women must wear a shawl or some kind of literal head covering, so what is it about?

Paul is addressing an external cultural custom that demonstrated a universal principal.

The Adam Clarke commentary says this about men wearing head coverings in the Corinthian church.

“— He should not wear his cap or turban in the public congregation, for this was a badge of servitude, or an indication that he had a conscience overwhelmed with guilt; and besides, it was contrary to the custom that prevailed, both among the Greeks and Romans.” Adam Clarke

When women wore a head covering in the Corinthian church they were demonstrating that they belonged to and respected their husbands.

When they didn’t wear some type of head covering they were ultimately saying that they were independent from their husbands. In that culture if a woman didn’t wear a head covering it could be considered a signal that she was a prostitute. That is why Paul said sarcastically “You may as well shave your head.” Because many of the worshipping temple prostitutes would keep their hair very short or shave their heads.

Obviously, in our culture, head coverings and short hair don’t speak anything of the sort.

In our culture, it might be like a wife slipping off her wedding ring and dressing to kill every time she went to church. As her husband you might start wondering, “Is she really with me?” And other men might have the same thought.

Paul’s teaching was about order in the Christian family and in the Christian worship service.

He wants to make it clear that even though men and women and husbands and wives are equal before God, as believers they were to demonstrate husbands and wives dependence upon each other in the way that God designed it.

Men and women especially when married are to show the rest of the world, the church, and maybe even celestial beings that Christ, not the curse, prevailed in their lives.

In order to understand this let’s go back to the beginning and look at God’s design. Remember Paul said:

“The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”

And…

“…man was not made for woman, but woman was made for man. 10 For this reason, and because the angels are watching, a woman should wear a covering on her head to show she is under authority.”

Man, that is a hard sell. By the way, I would never suggest telling any woman, especially your wife, that she is under authority. That is not going to go well. So let’s see why Paul said it.

First off, we should understand something about God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are all God. They are One and yet they, in Their roles, can be distinguished from each other. Jesus submitted Himself to God the Father’s authority even though the Father and the Son are equally the essence of God.

This is why Jesus said to people…

**28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me, 29 for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else.[d] No one can snatch them from the Father’s hand. 30 The Father and I are one.”**

**John 10:28-30 NLT**

And yet it was also said of Jesus, that…

**“Though he was God,**

**he did not think of equality with God**

**as something to cling to.**

**7 Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;**

**he took the humble position of a slave**

**and was born as a human being.**

**When he appeared in human form,**

**8 he humbled himself in obedience to God**

**and died a criminal’s death on a cross.”**

**Philippians 2:6-8 NLT**

Jesus and God the Father had equality, but Jesus submitted Himself to the Father’s leadership and plan.

This is very much the same kind of imagery that helps us understand the way that God designed Adam and Eve’s relationship.

If you remember the scriptures say:

**18 Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.”**

**Genesis 2:18 NLT**

Before we move on, I would like to note that the word “helper,” to us has a connotation of inferiority. But I will remind you that the Holy Spirit, who is God, is also called the Helper and He is in no way inferior to God the Father or God the Son.

Paul, when he tells the Corinthians that “man was not made for woman, but woman for man.” Is inferring that wives who are equal and one with their husbands were made to be a great help for their husbands.

But, unfortunately, after sin entered the world God brought a curse between man and woman. Genesis says:

**16 Then he said to the woman,**

**“I will sharpen the pain of your pregnancy,**

**and in pain you will give birth.**

**And you will desire to control your husband,**

**but he will rule over you.”**

**Genesis 3:16 NLT**

Instead of having a natural, innate desire for oneness, husband and wife would now have a wedge between them that leads to a struggle for dominance.

As believers of the gospel we are supposed to be different than those who are under the curse. The gospel of Jesus and His ministry of the cross opens the door for husband and wife to truly be one.

But this is not how things were going in Corinth. Instead of gospel inspired oneness married women in Corinth were minimizing their connections with their husbands. By not following the custom of covering their heads they were demonstrating a disrespect for their husbands.

Husbands were to humbly lead their wives showing their dependence on Christ and their wives and wives were to honor and respect their husbands for the role God gave them in marriage. Remember I already read…

**11 But among the Lord’s people, women are not independent of men, and men are not independent of women. 12 For although the first woman came from man, every other man was born from a woman, and everything comes from God.**

**1 Corinthians 11:11-12 NLT**

These two verses blow up any idea of superiority or inferiority. Instead, Paul’s words promote equality with differing roles and less evidence of the power struggle that comes from the curse.

So let’s get practical. Does this teaching say that women couldn’t teach or preach?

To understand I take you back to verse 5:

**5 But a woman dishonors her head if she prays or prophesies without a covering on her head, for this is the same as shaving her head. 6 Yes, if she refuses to wear a head covering, she should cut off all her hair! But since it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut or her head shaved, she should wear a covering.**

**1 Corinthians 11:5-6 NLT**

Instead of saying that Corinthian women couldn’t pray or prophesy (teach or preach) he addresses the manner in which they were praying and prophesying.

Paul would never want a woman praying or teaching in the church if she was further demonstrating the curse. A woman with a disrespect for men and especially her husband, shouldn’t be allowed to teach or preach.

And I would say the same is true about men. A man who has a disrespect for women or who views himself as superior to his wife should also keep his mouth shut in church. Remember it goes back verses 11-12:

**11 But among the Lord’s people, women are not independent of men, and men are not independent of women. 12 For although the first woman came from man, every other man was born from a woman, and everything comes from God.**

**1 Corinthians 11:11-12 NLT**

I will put it another way. In the context of Genesis 3.

Wives who consistently act on their natural impulse to control their husbands have no place speaking and praying in the gathered assembly of the saints.

And Husbands who consistently act on the curse born impulse to put their wives in their place and rule over them, likewise should not pray and prophesy in the church gathering.

As Christian teachers, preachers, and leaders we are to demonstrate Christ in our marriages and so help others understand the difference between the kingdom of the curse and the kingdom of the cross.

Galatians 3 says:

**27 And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. 28 There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

**Galatians 3:27-28 NLT**

There are countless considerations on how the roles of men and women and husbands and wives play out.

But as we consider God’s desire for various roles, equality in Christ must always be at the forefront. Men and women are not independent from each other. We need each other and in God’s wisdom He has created equality even though we are very different from one another.

A spirit of independence is pride. And pride is the work of the devil. Oneness, healthy dependence, honor and respect comes from God.