

Sensitivity to the Culture

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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. ... Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:3, 11-12

First Corinthians 11:2-16 is one of the most complex, highly debated passages in Scripture. The Corinthian church's struggle over head coverings and hair length are

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hard to understand from a modern viewpoint. Yet they teach us larger, more important lessons that we need to apply wherever we live: as Christians, we must be sensitive to our culture and be willing to forgo any liberties that would reflect badly upon God or cause Him to be misunderstood.

Under Authority

When some Corinthian Christian women stopped wearing head coverings in church, it had far-reaching negative consequences. First, it publicly dishonored their husbands (verse 5) because culturally their choice was not seen as an expression of personal liberty, but as rebellion against their husband's authority. Second, rebellion against a husband would also be viewed as rebellion against God, who established the authority structure in the home. Verse 3 explains God's authority structure's four layers: God the Father, Jesus, the husband, then the wife. This does not mean

a husband is intrinsically superior to a wife, just as Jesus is not less than the Father in any way—He and the Spirit are coequal with the Father. What we have here is a functional subordination. When Jesus entered the world to die on the cross for our sins, He voluntarily submitted to the Father's authority (Philippians 2:5-8). No one would demean Jesus for choosing submission to accomplish a greater purpose; nor should women be criticized for doing the same thing.

A husband's headship means that if after prayer and discussion a couple remains divided on an issue, it is the man's responsibility to make the final decision, and the wife's to support him. In Corinth, praying and prophesying with uncovered heads represented there being no human authority between a man and God (verse 4). Paul supports this authority order by referencing the creation account (Genesis 2): chronologically, woman came after Adam; constitutionally, she was made for him. Neither in origin or the purpose for which she was created can woman claim priority over man or reason for usurping his authority. This is why Paul mentions angels, who witnessed the dismissal of God's authority structure in the Garden of Eden, the horrible consequences of which we still experience today. Paul tells us that angels are present whenever we worship, and God wants them to witness His order restored.

Mutually Dependent

Any man who uses passages like this to justify disrespecting or intimidating his wife, however, is about as distant from Christ's heart as possible. A husband's God-appointed role should be his means for expressing his love and representing God's love for his wife in order to bless and enrich her life. Woman was created for man because he was in need of her help. God has also given woman the privilege of childbearing so that her vital role can never be diminished. Without her, mankind dies off in one generation. God's design reveals that both sexes are mutually dependent upon one another though we fulfill different roles within the family.

Finally, removing their head coverings reflected badly on the women themselves. In Corinth, the only women who traditionally wore their heads uncovered were the Temple of Aphrodite's prostitutes. This is why Paul tells the women they might as well wear their heads shaven, the mark of an adulterous woman in ancient culture. In exercising their freedom, they were misrepresenting Christianity to their unsaved neighbors by unwittingly appearing comfortable with sexual immorality.

Liberty vs. Witness

These customs were necessary because of the culture's expectations, not God's. Paul does not reference any corresponding Scriptures, because there are none. As in chapters 8-10, Paul is explaining how the Corinthians can effectively represent Christ in their culture. Both sexes must communicate their submission to God's authority structure in a way relevant to their culture. In western culture today, head coverings are irrelevant. I would venture to guess most people draw their conclusions about a wife's submission to her husband on the basis of the life she lives and how she treats him. Yet we do have cultural symbols, like the wedding ring. A married person removing their ring is usually a bad sign. What conclusions do you think non-Christians would draw if the majority of Christian women stopped wearing their wedding rings? Technically they could do that—God does not require wedding bands. Yet exercising that freedom would horribly misrepresent Christianity to the world, and no decent person would want anything to do with it. Similarly, hair length no longer defines gender in our culture the way Paul describes in verses 14-15, yet we should not do anything that blurs the healthy differences in the sexes. God created them male and female—we are to honor that. Men should not act in any way that confuses people about their sexuality. There are many attractive, short hairstyles for women, but basically Paul is saying: embrace your femininity; God has given it to you. Paul concludes, however, by saying he doesn't want to make an issue out of this. It is not about making new regulations, but remembering that the spiritual welfare of other Christians and the salvation of the lost are more important than our liberties. ✚