

THE ROLE OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

11 ²I praise you for remembering me in everything and for keeping the teachings just as I delivered them to you. ³But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of a woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered is dishonoring his head. ⁵But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered is dishonoring her head—for it is just as though [her head] were shaved. ⁶If a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair sheared. But if it is disgraceful for a woman to have [her hair] sheared or shaved off, let her cover her head. ⁷A man ought not to have his head covered, [because] he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man—⁸for man did not come from woman, but woman [was taken] out of man. ⁹Furthermore, man was not created for the woman; on the contrary, woman was created for the man. ¹⁰Because of this, the woman ought to have [a symbol of] authority on her head for the sake of the angels. ¹¹Nevertheless, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman, in the Lord. ¹²Just as the woman [was taken] out of the man, so also the man [is born] by the woman; but everything [comes] from God. ¹³Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair it is a glory for her?—because the long hair has been given to her as a covering. ¹⁶Now if anyone wants to be contentious, [let him know that] we have no [place for] such a practice, nor do the churches of God. (1 Cor. 11:2-16)

Introduction

The so-called “Woman’s Liberation Movement” made as big an impact on first-century Corinth as it has made upon present day society. And the impact of that movement was keenly felt within the Corinthian church, just as it has been felt within the church of our own day.

What does the Bible have to say about the relationship of men and women and their respective roles within the church? The Word of God teaches that there is a fundamental equality of men and women before God. According to 1 Corinthians 11:5, women, as well as men, are found praying (addressing God) and prophesying (receiving direct revelation from God) in the church. We may also note the teaching of the Apostle Peter,

*... may the husbands live with their wives in an understanding way: showing respect to **the wife** as a weaker partner and as **a co-heir of the grace of life**. Conduct yourselves in this way so that your prayers are not hindered. (1 Pet. 3:7)*

But the Word of God also teaches that there is a distinction between the roles God has assigned to men and women respectively: “*the head of a woman is the man*” (1 Cor. 11:3.) Christ’s headship over all men is reflected in the man’s headship over the woman in Christian marriage, note Ephesians 5:23, (“*the husband is the head of the*

wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior,") and in the church of Christ, the subject of this present chapter of 1 Corinthians.

There is a spiritual equality of men and women before God, but to each He has assigned a unique and distinct role. By way of illustration, the quarterback and the tackle are both equal members of the football team, but their respective roles are different. The quarterback decides what plays the team will run and he is in charge of leading the team, the tackle and the other players are assigned the role of helping to successfully execute the play.

We might say that Christian marriage and the Christian church are intended by God to serve as a type of "morality play" before the world: testifying to the Lordship of Christ and of God over mankind, and the subordination of mankind to Christ and to God. In this "morality play" God has assigned to the Christian man the role of portraying Christ's position, and to the Christian woman He has assigned the role of portraying mankind's position.

So that the Christian man not be tempted to boast in his divinely-assigned role or abuse it, he is reminded, *"the Head of every man is Christ"* (1 Cor. 11:3b.) Christ is the sovereign Lord over all mankind, the One to whom every man, including the Christian man, is accountable. Christ has been entrusted with this position and authority by God His Father: *"God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything"* (Eph. 1:22.)

So that the Christian woman does not feel slighted by the role assigned to her, she is reminded, *"the Head of Christ is God"* (1 Cor. 11:3c. In assigning her the role of subordination, Christ is not asking the Christian woman to do anything that He Himself was not willing to do. In His capacity as the incarnate Messiah, Christ assumed the subordinate role before God His Father:

Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus: ⁶existing in the form of God, he did not regard his being on an equality with God as a thing to be exploited; ⁷on the contrary, he emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. Being found as a man in appearance, ⁸he humbled himself by becoming obedient unto death, even death on the cross. (Phil. 2:5-8)

Although they are equal before God, it is important for us to recognize the different roles God has assigned to men and women. Because it is God Himself who has assigned these distinct roles to men and women, these divinely instituted roles must be respected. Let us now consider what the Apostle Paul has to say about this subject in 1 Corinthians 11.

I. Look Back: To See the Creation of These Distinct Roles by God (11:7-12)

In verses 4-7 Paul explains the distinct conduct that is to characterize the man and the woman in the church:

Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered is dishonoring his head. ⁵But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered is dishonoring her head—for it is just as though [her head] were shaved. ⁶If a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair sheared. But if it is disgraceful for a woman to have [her hair] sheared or shaved off, let her cover her head. ⁷A man ought not to have his head covered, [because] he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. (1 Cor. 11:4-7)

While conducting public prayer or engaged in the act of prophesying, the man ought not to have his head covered—his uncovered head visibly demonstrating his God-given role of headship, (the covering of the head being a display of subordination.) Conversely, when she is engaged in such acts, the woman is to have her head covered, thereby visibly demonstrating her God-given role of subordination. For the same reason, within the church the woman is not permitted to have a formal or ordained teaching position over the man, note 1 Timothy 2:12-13, *“I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent; ¹³for Adam was formed first, then Eve.”*

In verse 7b the apostle presents the reason for this distinction: *“[the man] is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.”* In explanation and support of this statement Paul refers the Corinthians to Genesis 2, *“for man did not come from woman, but woman [was taken] out of man.”* Originally, the man was not derived from the woman, but the woman was derived from the man, note Genesis 2:21-23,

So Jehovah God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While he slept, [Jehovah] took one of [the man’s] ribs, and closed up the flesh [of the man’s side]. ²²Then Jehovah God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³Then 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. (Gen. 2:21-23)

Paul goes on to write, *“furthermore, man was not created for the woman; on the contrary, woman was created for the man.”* The man was not created for the sake of the woman, but the woman was created for the sake of the man, note Genesis 2:18, *“And Jehovah God said, It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.”*

According to the teaching of Genesis 2, the man was the first human being created in the image of God: *“And Jehovah God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”* (Gen. 2:7.) Furthermore, to the man was given the initial assignment to exercise dominion over the creation, note Genesis 2: 20, *“So the man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the heavens, and to every beast of the field; but for man there was not found a helper suitable for him.”* In Scripture, the act of naming something or someone is often an indication of exercising dominion over that

particular thing or person. Note that in Genesis 2:23 Adam names the woman, indicating his role of headship over her in their marital state: *“Then 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.”*

Genesis 2 goes on to teach that the woman was created to be man’s unique helper and companion:

And Jehovah God said, It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him ... ²¹So Jehovah God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While he slept, [Jehovah] took one of [the man’s] ribs, and closed up the flesh [of the man’s side.] ²²Then Jehovah God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. (Gen. 2:18,21-22)

We must also recognize that the woman has been called to share with the man in the exercise of a responsible dominion over the creation under the LORD their God, and that they equally share in the identity of being made in the image of God:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸And God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. (Gen. 1:27-28)

In verse 10 the apostle now states his conclusion, namely, that because of the history and the structure of creation it is appropriate for the woman *“to have [a symbol of] authority on her head.”* That is to say, the wearing of some type of head covering while engaged in the leading of public prayer or prophesying would be a visible sign of her role of subordination assigned to her by God.

The phrase, *“for the sake of the angels,”* demonstrates two things. First, it shows that true spiritual worship involves the heavenly beings. Second, it indicates that the distinction in the roles of men and women is far more than merely cultural, it is spiritual.

II. Look Around: To See the Testimony of Nature to These Distinct Roles (11:13-15)

Having concluded his fundamental argument based on Old Testament Scripture, the Apostle Paul now presents a second argument, appealing to the natural order of things (vs. 14-15.)

He confronts the Corinthians with the question, *“Does not nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair it is a disgrace to him?”* In other words, there is a natural, innate sense that for a man to wear his hair long, (in a womanly fashion,) is to dishonor and disgrace himself. Note: In a given culture at a given

time, a segment of that culture may seek to defy or deny this visible differentiation between the man and the woman, (a visible differentiation that testifies to the differentiation of their God-given roles and that ultimately testifies to mankind's distinction from and subordination to God our Creator)—by way of example, we may point to the contemporary rock music stars.

The apostle goes on to declare, "*but if a woman has long hair it is a glory for her*" (vs. 15a.) Conversely from the appearance of the man, there is also the innate sense and recognition that a woman's long hair is a glory to her—it is an integral part of her beauty and feminine identity, by way of example we may observe that the beauty queens invariably display long feminine hairstyles.

The Apostle Paul's argument is that there is a natural, innate sense that tells us that long, womanish style hair is a disgrace to a man, but is a glory to a woman. The more blatantly and openly defiant a society becomes against God, the more prominent becomes the defiance against and denial of this natural, innate distinction between men and women with regard to hairstyle—and this trend is led by and promoted by that segment of the society that is the most openly and consciously defiant of God and His divinely-ordained standards.

III. Look Forward: To See the Consequence of Abandoning These Distinct Roles (11:4-6)

The apostle declares, "*every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered is dishonoring her head*" (vs. 5.) This is so because she is forsaking her God-given role of subordination and is intentionally, or unintentionally, expressing a desire to usurp the role God has given to the man.

In order to dramatically indicate the disgrace it is for a woman to lead in public prayer or to prophesy with her head uncovered, the apostle writes, "*it is just as though [her head] were shaved.*" A shaved head for a woman is an obvious form of shame and disgrace, note Isaiah 3:24, "*Instead of the fragrance [of perfume] there will be stench; instead of a sash, a rope; instead of fashionable hair, baldness; instead of fine clothing, sackcloth; instead of beauty, branding.*" Isaiah is depicting the shame and disgrace that would come upon the women of Israel as they were led away into captivity by the conquering enemy.

With mild sarcasm, the apostle counsels that if a woman refuses to cover her head while engaging in public prayer or prophesying, she should go so far as to have her hair sheared—i.e.; cut extremely short and in a masculine style (vs. 6.) Paul is addressing a case in which a woman insists on removing her veil or head covering as she engages in the leading of the congregation in public prayer or as she engages in the act of prophesying during a worship service. Her defiant behavior is an indication that she is renouncing her God-given role of subordination in favor of the man's God-given role of headship—i.e.; she wants to be like the man. Since this is the case, the apostle's argument is that it is only

consistent for her to cut off her long hair, because her long hair itself is a covering (note verse 15b.) Thus, the Apostle Paul is saying to such a woman, If you insist on removing one form of covering and sign of subordination, (namely, your veil,) be consistent and remove every form of covering and sign of subordination, including your long, feminine hairstyle!

But, as the apostle now proceeds to point out, it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair sheared or to have her head shaved (vs. 6.) By way of contemporary example: After undergoing chemotherapy, (which treatment often causes hair loss,) a man may appear in public with a baldhead. But a woman would never think of allowing herself to be seen with her head bald, she would resort to wearing a wig or some other form of head covering to conceal her loss of hair. Note: The very thing that is a sign of the woman's God-given role of subordination, (namely, her long hair serving as a covering over her head,) is at the same time a primary source of her glory: her beauty and feminine identity. Thus, in her effort to renounce her subordinate role, (by removing her veil and cutting her hair,) the woman would be relinquishing her own unique God-given beauty, glory, and feminine identity.

This is the apostle's point: When a woman renounces her God-given role and seeks to assume the man's God-given role, she inevitably sacrifices her God-given feminine identity as well. The following illustration of this truth was vividly on display at an airport one day: An attractive businesswoman, in attempting to relate to a cab driver on his masculine terms, sacrificed her unique feminine identity. In tone of voice and use of language, she imitated the masculine cab driver, but by doing so she inadvertently created a totally incongruous, laughable, self-disgracing spectacle. Consider the counsel offered to women by a secular, female psychotherapist named Joan Borsysenko:

Stop trying to "have it all" by behaving like men in the workplace; acknowledge the needs in your basic nature and find some balance in your life—for the sake of your psychological, physical and spiritual health ... The average woman who's trying to act like a man and working 60 hours a week is going to be less happy than the average man working 60 hours a week. Her basic needs as a human being are different, and she's selling out on those needs. (*The Calgary Herald*, 10/18/90)

Look forward, and see the consequence of abandoning these distinct, God-given roles. If a woman wants to renounce her unique role as a woman, she will inevitably also wind up sacrificing her unique identity as a woman. According to Christina Hoff Sommers, associate professor of philosophy at Clark University, this is precisely the goal of the modern feminist movement, namely, to cause the woman to give up her unique God-given identity as a woman together with all that that entails:

The new feminism ... is not primarily concerned with more opportunities for women ... War has been declared, not on inequality, but upon gender ... They [the new feminists] typically share an ideal of a genderless culture that inspires their rejection of such entrenched social arrangements as the family, marriage and maternal responsibility for child rearing ... Gender feminist literature is replete with proposals for abolishing marriage and the family in favor of various forms of androgyny [“androgyny” is the manifesting of both male and female characteristics in a single person] or bisexuality. (*IMPRIMUS*, June, 1990)

Whenever you renounce a God-given form of subordination in the name of freedom, you always end up with a hellish form of subordination instead of freedom—by way of example, consider the agenda of the radical feminists:

No woman should be authorized to stay at home and raise her children ... Women should not have the choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one. (Simone de Beauvoir, the acknowledged founder of modern feminist philosophy, quoted in the 1975 issue of *Saturday Review* and reprinted in *IMPRIMUS*, June, 1990)

Being a housewife is an illegitimate profession ... the choice to serve and be protected and plan towards being a family-maker is a choice that shouldn't be. The heart of radical feminism is to change that. (Vivian Gornick, a feminist author, quoted in the University of Illinois publication, *The Daily Illini*, April 25, 1981, and reprinted in *INPRIMUS*, June, 1990)

Conclusion

Although they are equal before God, it is important for us to recognize the distinct roles God has assigned to men and women. Because it is God Himself who has assigned these distinct roles to men and women, these divinely instituted roles must be respected. In the home, husbands must assume the role of leadership and headship, while wives must acknowledge the role assigned to their husbands and help them to fulfill it. In the church, men must take the role of leadership, especially in youth activities in order to set a godly pattern for the children and young people.