

What is Headship

The passage we have before us this morning in First Corinthians has been a veritable minefield for interpreters. In my study this week the commentators I have read point out that there is no passage more difficult to understand in this letter than these verses in chapter 11. It is hard to understand because we do not know exactly what Paul was responding to when he was discussing the issue of head coverings. We can piece together the hypothesis that there was an attitude in Corinth where some of the people in the congregation were suggesting by their actions that distinctions between men and women should be done away with. That in Christ we are unisex. Paul's response to this is no, the sexes are not the same. They are equal and mutually dependent on each other but at the same time there are distinguishing qualities that mark men as men and women as women. These distinguishing qualities are to be maintained and honoured within the body of Christ.

I want to begin our study by looking at verse 3 where Paul writes: ³ Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." On first reading we could conclude that Paul is establishing a hierarchical principle here that supports the domination of women by men. But this verse does not lend support to that idea. We need to see the progression of the verse. When Paul says that Christ is the head of man he means that Christ is the source of man's life. That is, it is by Christ and through Christ that man is created. Before we look at the middle clause of this verse please notice the third clause. Their Paul says that God is the head of Christ. This means that in his incarnation God was the source of Jesus being born into the world, by a virgin named Mary. When he then goes on to say that man is the head of woman he is building on this same idea by referring to the creation story in Genesis two where the woman is taken from the man. Now if we think of this story in Genesis two, you will remember that after the woman has been created, the man says, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman for out of Man this one was taken. In this verse Paul says nothing about the man's authority. But about the man being the source for the woman's life. This line of interpretation is further supported when we look at verses 11 and 12: "In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹² For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God." Do you see how in these verses Paul says that if in Genesis two the Man was the source for the Woman's life now through the gift of reproduction the Woman is the source of the Man's life? Originally the woman

came from the man but ever since all men have come from women and as he then says God is the primary source for all life.

We can therefore conclude that Paul's concern in this verse is therefore not hierarchical, but relational. He argues this because he wants the Corinthians to recognize that the two sexes are mutually dependent on each other and their distinctiveness needs to be maintained. This is an important principle for us to affirm today. Because verses like this have often been read supporting the domination of women by men this verse has often been misused.

I want to affirm that there is much in the woman's movement of the past forty years that has been very positive. Not only has it provided a way for women to find their place in professions like medicine. I mention this field, because as many of you know, my wife Peggy is a doctor. Her father was also a physician. His medical class picture from the 1950s had no women in it. Peggy's class, which graduated in 1989, had about 40 percent women. This positive development has also provided as parallel opportunity for men to take a more active role in the raising of their children and has meant for a mutuality in relationships between men and women that was not present thirty or forty years ago. However because there has also been a rightful desire to break away from male domination it has perhaps resulted in our diminishing the differences between men and women and has lead to the conclusion that the sexes don't need each other, and has at times then resulted in gender wars. But, says Paul, we do need each other. Instead of warring against each other we need to honour what makes men, men and what makes women, women. We are not the same. We compliment each other. It is this creation principle says the Apostle that the Church of Jesus Christ is to affirm.

This leads into verse four where Paul writes: "Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. ⁵ And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head--it is just as though her head were shaved." What I want to highlight in this verse is that Paul affirms that both men and women are to prophesy and to pray. Ray Stedman, whose sermons on First Corinthians I have drawn from heavily in these last six weeks writes: "Prophesying is what today we would call preaching. It is expounding the word of God by taking the Scriptures and making them shine and illuminate life." Here is a verse that is one of the clearest endorsements for women's ordination. For although Paul would not have called it such, if we think about two of the most visible ministries the ordained

exercise when the church gathers, it is preaching and praying. I am a priest. Right now I am preaching and in a little while I will be leading us in the Eucharistic Prayer. Preaching and praying. Paul says that both men and women can exercise this ministry. But men do it as men and women as women. They are not the same. We do not need women priests trying to be more masculine in order to validate their ordination. They are to be themselves. The Scripture is validation enough.

It would seem to me that the application we can take away from this is that within the local congregation it is best if both men and women are exercising the ordained office. As I was looking at this verse, it gave me pause to thank God that Ruthy has come amongst us and is able to exercise her vocation as a priest. It is with anticipation that we look forward to Sue's ordination as a deacon. As we affirm these women in their ministries we are more fully reflecting that kind of community presented to us in verse four. Yes, I am thankful for women's ordination because the role of prophesying and praying is something the Apostle Paul presents as a given. Given to both men and women.

Now let's move down to verses 7 through 9. "A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹ neither was man created for woman, but woman for man."

This is a very crucial paragraph, and one that we must note carefully and understand fully. In it Paul is talking about the subject of headship. He says that, in the beginning, man was made in the image and glory of God. Now if you know your Bible well, you will recall that in Genesis 1:27 it says "God created Adam in his own image, in the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them" So although Paul says that man is the image of God, we need to also include woman in this understanding as well. This is assumed in Genesis 1 where the Hebrew for man is Adam but then goes on to say that Adam includes both man and woman, anticipating the creation story of Genesis two that I mentioned earlier.

Now what does this word image mean? Image is the full manifestation of something. In this case it is God himself. Adam was made in God's image in order that any creature, looking at Adam, would see the likeness, the very nature of God. That is the dignity of humanity.

What we must bear clearly in mind is that, when Genesis states the man was made in the image of God, it was made before the two sexes were separated. Adam was first created, and it was of Adam, before Eve was separated from him, that it is said that man is the image and glory of God. This means that after the separation woman shares the image and the glory of God equally with the male. They are both included when it is said that man was made in the image and the glory of God. Therefore, the woman bears equally with the male the image and glory of God. That is very important.

What is glory? Let me use an analogy. We could say that the painting, sculpture, composition or a tapestry of an artist or composer is his or her glory. That is, the work of art both gives expression to a part of the artist's self and at the same time brings praise and honour to the artist's skills. This verse tells us that, when Adam was created, he was made to reflect the nature of God, and, in that, God takes great delight. Adam was to live in such a way that his life was to honour the master's skills and so reflect God's glory.

You see this beautifully in the life of Jesus. Everywhere he went he demonstrated the love of God for humankind. Even though the race had turned aside and was far from what it ought to be, everywhere in the ministry of Jesus you see him pouring forth the love of God for people. That is what drew people by great multitudes to hear his words. In him they caught a glimpse of the glory and delight that God takes in humanity and they longed to find the way back to the enjoyment of that delight. Thus in the opening words of John's gospel it says, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," and "we beheld his glory," {John 1:14}.

Now when we talk about the subject of headship, the topic at issue here, Paul is teaching us that the male is to take a place of primary responsibility in seeing that his life is becoming more like Christ's. This does not mean that a woman is not to become more like Christ. But in the way God has ordered human relationships men are to take leadership positions in cultivating a spiritual environment within their homes and churches that allow God's character to be manifest in such a way that God is honoured. The tragedy is that all too often in the Church and in families men have abdicated that calling and have not taken their leadership positions in giving their primary attention to reflecting God's glory by becoming more like Christ. All too often this has been left to women and when this occurs there is a blurring of the distinctiveness between men and women.

For when we understand this order than we will better understand what Paul means when he says that a woman is the glory of the man. It is in the woman that the man finds his delight, Paul is picking up on the thought that woman is the delight of man as this is alluded to in Genesis two when Adam says this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. It involves a private, intimate glory, that intimacy which a man finds in his wife, the intimacy of sexual relationship and of shared love. It is something hidden and private, therefore it is to be symbolized by a veil.

In wearing a veil a woman also gives testimony to the existence of another aspect of the glory of God, the intimacy of delight that is achieved only through redemption. When we enter, by faith in Jesus Christ, into the new birth we discover a glory of God beyond creation. It is redemptive glory. We all have experienced it, if we are Christians. We know the ecstasy of fellowship with God, of worship, of experiencing the beautiful and intimate love relationship of a bride with her bridegroom, described in that marvelous passage in the fifth chapter of Ephesians.

Woman was taken from man in order that she might share fully his nature. Man and woman are not two different kinds of beings. They do not represent two species of human life. They have differences, but they are of the same basic nature. This is what is meant by 'woman being taken from man.' But, in addition, she is brought to man. She was brought to him that she might be 'for' him. This, I think, is the key thought involved in headship. She is for her husband; she is behind him, backing him up; she is supportive of him; she wants him to succeed and she is deeply involved in the process. She is undergirding him in every way she can, and finding delight in doing so, that together they might achieve the objectives which his head, Christ, has set before them.

In turn, the male is to discover the secrets God has put into his wife, and seek to develop her, so that she will be all that she is capable of being. In doing so he is but advancing his own objectives. This is the argument of Ephesians 5. They are one and no man hates his own flesh. If he hurts his wife he hurts himself; if he ignores her, he is ignoring half of his own life. There is no way that he can achieve the fullness of his manhood in marriage apart from working at developing and encouraging his wife to utilize all the gifts and abilities God has put in her.

In conclusion we see that this passage rather than being a club that insures women be kept in their place, is a wonderful manifesto expressing that in Christ men and women

share in a life of mutuality. This is a mutuality shared in ministry where both men and women preach and pray and it is a life where together men and women share in the glory of God.