

1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-6

INTRODUCTION

The role of women has become a battleground within our society during the last several decades. The struggle for women's rights has escalated to an extent that it is out of balance and ultimately it is to the detriment of the women that the movement claims it is seeking to help. What is it that lies behind the increasing abortion rate in our nation? It is the rights of women to choose.

Now when an issue affects society in general then it usually begins to affect the church as well and this is what we have observed over the last decade or so. The problem is of course that when it affects the church it tends to be dealt with in unbiblical ways and before long women are fulfilling roles that God never intended them to fulfil.

Often the clear biblical principles are laid to one side in order to allow the spirit of the age to flourish within the church.

Now the church at Corinth faced a situation that is similar to the one that we face today and the believers who wrote to Paul (7:1) apparently had asked for guidance concerning the whole issue of the role of women within the church especially the application of submission for women. Paul was pleased that they sought his guidance (v 2). They respected Paul and they respected his guidance, they knew he knew God's word and that he was their Apostle and therefore needed his guidance.

Paul also praises the church because they are basically following and holding on to the teachings that Paul taught them and by seeking Paul's wisdom it is clear that they want to follow the Lord's way in this matter concerning women (v 2). Yes they were immature and had many problems in the church but by writing to Paul they show that they wanted to sort out their many problems and they wanted to follow Christ.

The problems with the church at Corinth did not so much concern doctrine although there was confusion over the doctrine of the resurrection but their problem was living out their Christian faith. They knew the teachings and the principles but they had real difficulty living those truths and principles out especially in the church.

1. THE PRINCIPLE STATED (v 3)

Paul begins his response to the church's question by stating clearly the basic divine principle that he is going to discuss and apply concerning this issue of the role and function of women. Women in their Greek culture lived in the background and were often used and abused especially in the area of prostitution by men.

The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ gave these women dignity and respect, which seems to have been abused by at least some of the women in the church at Corinth. Paul deals with this situation by showing that men and women are equal in status but they are not equal in function. In other words men are not better than women when it comes to value and worth but there is a distinction and a difference when it comes to function and roles.

The principle stated is one of subordination and authority and this principle pervades our whole universe. Paul shows us that women's subordination to men is but a reflection of a greater truth. That is that God is the head of Christ and Christ is the head of every man and therefore men are the head of women (v 3).

If Christ had not been willing to submit to the will of his Father then redemption for mankind would not have been possible and we would forever be lost and destined for hell. In the same way if

people do not submit to Christ as Saviour and Lord then they cannot be saved because they reject God's gracious provision of salvation. Likewise if women do not submit to men then the family and society as a whole are disrupted and destroyed.

So whether on a divine or human scale the principle of submission and authority are indispensable elements in God's order and plan.

The word "head" refers to order as ordained by God. We use the word in Schools to talk about Head Teachers. They are the ones responsible for the School, there is a structure and everyone knows that the Head Teacher is at the top of the order when it comes to authority. Paul is showing us here by this principle that headship is manifested in three ways.

a) Firstly Christ is the head of every person. He is uniquely the head of the church as its Saviour and Lord for he has redeemed and paid the price for the church by his own blood. But in his divine authority Christ is the head, the ruler of every person unbeliever and believer alike. Most people don't recognise or submit to Christ's authority but Christ has been granted all authority to rule in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). Everything is put under his feet (Hebrews 2:8) and one day everyone will acknowledge his headship for we will all acknowledge and confess that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11).

So men and women will not be allowed to ignore Christ's authority forever for one day everyone will acknowledge their subjection to Christ for he is in ultimate control of all people both now and forever.

b) Secondly the man is the head of the woman. The principle of submission and authority applies to all men and women supremely seen in the marriage relationship. This is the basic order of creation as Paul explains in verses 8-9, this is the way God planned and created mankind and it is the way that his created order is suppose to function.

Now let's be clear here and understand that Paul is not saying that there is a difference between men and women as far as worth is concerned. Women are equal to men when it comes to worth and value. Some women are ahead of some men when it comes to gifts and intellect and maturity. But when it comes to roles and functions then God has established the principle of male authority and female submission for the purpose of order and complementation. God has not established male authority on the basis of any innate superiority of men.

Now this principle of authority and submission in general is established throughout society. An employee might be more intelligent than his boss but for the sake of order you have to have managers who manage and workers who work otherwise our society would not function. Now the various roles within work have nothing to do with worth or value but it has to do with authority and submission.

Likewise in churches Elders are to be men and their task is to oversee and lead the congregation. Now there will be people in the congregation who are more intelligent or are even more gifted but for the sake of order in churches Elders are to lead and members are to be led. For churches to function as God designed then this principle must be upheld and worked out within the life of the church.

Likewise wives might be better educated than their husbands they might be more spiritual and godly too but they are to understand God's stated principle of male leadership within the family, wives are to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-33).

c) Thirdly God is the Head of Christ. - Jesus made it clear on a number of occasions that he willingly submitted himself to his Father's will (John 4:34 & 5:30). Christ has never been either

before during or after his incarnation inferior in essence to his Father. But in the incarnation He willingly subordinated himself to his Father in his role as Saviour and Redeemer.

He lovingly subjected himself completely to his Father's will as an act of humble obedience in fulfilling the divine purpose. Now there is no greater example of how this stated principle is worked out in practice than the status and role of Christ to his Father. He was in every way one with the Father in substance in power and in eternity, yet Jesus willingly submitted himself to his Father in his role as Saviour of sinners.

Now I hope you can see how Paul ties the three aspects of the principle together. As Christ is submissive to his Father and all people are to be submissive to Christ therefore women are to be submissive to men. You cannot reject one part without rejecting the other two. You cannot reject the principle of male headship without also rejecting Christ's submission to his Father and everyone's submission to Christ.

Now before we move on we must point out that the authority and submission in everyone of these cases is based on love not tyranny. The Father loved his Son and sent Christ into our world out of love for this world. The Son loved His Father and willingly submitted himself even to death out of love for sinners.

Now Christ loves the men and women and those men and women who have been redeemed submit to him because they love Him.

In the same way Christian men should exercise their leadership authority in love not tyranny and Christian women should submit out of love as God has designed them to do. So the principle has nothing to be with worth and value but it has everything to do with function and role.

2. THE PRINCIPLE APPLIED (vs. 4-6)

Having stated the general principle Paul seeks to apply that principle to the situation at the church at Corinth. What was the situation at Corinth that Paul was seeking to address? We cannot be absolutely sure here but we do know that if we were to travel back in time and go to Corinth at the time when Paul was writing his first letter we would notice the similarity of dress between men and women. Both wore long robes. The main noticeable difference between men and women was that women had long hair and wore a head covering.

Now it seems that the head covering referred to here is not a veil for that covered your face but some sort of covering that just went over your head. It needs to be pointed out that almost all the women at Corinth wore this head covering. The only women who didn't were the mistresses and the local prostitutes.

Now it seems that the thing that was causing problems among the Christian community at Corinth was that some of the Christian women were not wearing head covering as they should have. Now we do not know the reason for this, it is possible that there was a feminist movement in Corinth and that some of the Christian women at Corinth had been influenced by this movement and were deliberately leaving their head covering at home in order to declare their liberation.

Whatever the cause was for the removal of the normal head covering the problem was that Christian women were appearing dressed like immoral women and this of course was a poor testimony in Corinth and blight upon the church. Perhaps some may even have been going against their husband's advice about their dress code and were therefore usurping his God given authority within the marriage bond.

So the summary of the problem is very simple. Women in Corinth normally had long hair and wore head coverings and that is what distinguished them from men. Men on the other hand had shorter hair and did not wear head coverings. Any change in these cultural conventions would cause a stir and would be a distraction and would ultimately overthrow God's order of male authority and female subordination.

Now it seems reasonable to think that Paul is not thinking about formal church gatherings here. For in 11:17 to the end of chapter 14 Paul is giving instructions about the formal gatherings of the church but it is best to understand that Paul is thinking about activities that believers were engaged in and these activities were public but were not necessarily public worship services.

Therefore it was a public activity therefore a clear testimony is demanded. In the most general sense praying is talking to God about people including us and prophesying is talking to people about God. These really summarise the ministry of every Christian here on earth we must talk to God about people and we must talk to people about God.

We will deal more with the issue of prophesying and its meaning in chapter 14 for now the issue is one of authority and submission so we will deal with that one today. Now the application is that a man dishonours his head if he covers his head when praying or prophesying for that says one commentator "is to make a woman of himself."

That would be to dress as a woman does and that is inappropriate for a man to do. To dishonour his head means to dishonour his role of authority. He would be placing himself in submission to the woman present. It is unlikely that this was happening at Corinth but Paul wants to show the contrast. For just as a man covering his head is wrong so a woman not covering her head in their culture and time was wrong.

In fact if a woman prays or prophesies with her head uncovered it is like her having her head shaved which again in her culture was a disgrace for a woman to do (v 5-6).

Do you see what Paul is doing? Paul is not stating a divine universal requirement for all women in every culture but he is applying the general principle of verse 3 to a specific custom and situation. Therefore I do not believe that this has anything to do with whether a woman wears a hat in church or not. It is about the roles and functions of men and women and it is about the public testimony of God's people.

In our culture a man should make sure that he dresses manly and women should dress like a woman. There should never be a case when we think is that a man or woman, it should be clear. But the issue is deeper than dress codes for it is about knowing our rightful place in God's order. Ladies you should never give the impression that you are rejecting the God given authority of your husband or of men in general.

You can do this by your attitudes and by your actions. There are women who do not like the fact that only men can be Elders in our churches and often vocally display their disagreement to this. Others might never do so vocally but they refuse to submit to such men by generally refusing to listen to their advice and instruction and by constantly seeking to show them up in front of others. Other Christian women don't like to think that their husband's are the head of their homes and try to dominate their husbands so that the man is almost like a puppet on a string. Men we must not let this happen in our homes or in our churches.

So you see at Corinth there were rebellious women who did not like their God ordained role in life and in the church as we will see in later chapters and one of the ways that they showed their disapproval was to pray and prophecy with their head uncovered. They were dressing like men and seeking to usurp their God given authority.

In our own culture our dress senses should clearly show the differences between men and women for it also shows the differences in functions between a man and a woman and this should be clearly demonstrated in the church.

In conclusion let me finish by discussing the difficulty that some see here with the use of women praying or prophesying. This has sometimes been used to acknowledge the right of a woman to teach and preach within the church. Some would say that Paul is contradicting what he says in 14:34-36 for in that passage he forbids a woman to prophesy which remember in its most basic meaning means to speak to people about God, therefore includes public ministry.

But I do not think Paul is even talking about ministry within the public worship in this section for that subject starts as I have already said in verse 17. He is simply saying that there are many public places that a woman will speak to others about God and many places where she will pray to God for others. It's at those times women are to do so with their head covered within the culture of Corinth.

The Bible is not as restrictive on woman's ministry as many people think. There is nothing to stop a woman from witnessing to men or praying in public prayer meetings when men are present. They can exercise ministry to women and children and even to individuals who are struggling in their faith.

When they do exercise their gifts in all those settings and in other setting as well, they must do so in the knowledge that they know God's order and not seek to exercise that public ministry within the church that God forbids (1 Timothy 2:12). That often is the problem within churches. There are some women who exercise fine ministries both within and outside the church but they are not content with their place in God's order and seek to exercise a public ministry to both men and women from our pulpits.

When they do so they are bringing disgrace upon their own head which in the case of a woman is her husband and of course Christ Himself. Churches need to work this out in practise for far too long churches have not recognised the useful ministries that women perform within the church and this has led to rebellion concerning their role and function within the church.

We must encourage right and helpful and useful ministries that woman can fulfil without ever stepping beyond God's order and allowing women to exercise roles that God forbids them from performing.

So let's remember the principle is that men and women are equal but they both have different roles and functions to perform within society and within the church. Let us ask for God's grace to help us to maintain those distinctives and let us ask for wisdom to know how best to use men and women in ministry throughout the church and in society without ever crossing over God ordained barriers.

When we learn to apply this principle then both men and women will be better for it and the church and society will function in a God honouring way that will be for the good of everyone and ultimately will bring glory to God.

Amen