

## 1 Corinthians 11A

- Last week we concluded our study of Paul's explanation of Christian liberty
  - In three chapters, Paul addressed the Corinthians' rights to consume meat sacrificed to idols
    - Paul addressed this topic in his letter because the Corinthians themselves had apparently asked about the practice
    - He began the section in chapter 8 with the introduction, "Now concerning..." which is the indication that Paul has moved to a new topic
    - And then for the next three chapters, Paul worked his way through a series of points on the matter of eating meat
  - Paul has received other questions from Chloe and the delegation, and he will address each in turn in his letter,
    - But Paul also introduces topics of his own along the way
    - For example, in answering the question on meat, Paul introduced his own topic of Christian liberty
    - We can see Paul wanted to make sure the church understood a larger context even as he addressed their particular concern
- As we enter chapter 11 today, we find Paul moving even farther away from the question he was asked, yet remaining on the general topic of liberty

[1Cor. 11:1](#) Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

[1Cor. 11:2](#) Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

- We notice Paul doesn't use the phrase "Now concerning..."
  - This tells us Paul hasn't yet moved on to a new question
  - Nevertheless, what follows is new subject matter
  - Instead, Paul is about to raise a couple of new topics because he's heard of abuses of liberty taking place in the church
  - He introduces his concerns with a couple of statements

- Paul starts with an exhortation that the church should follow Paul's lead, imitating Paul's self-restraint from chapter 10
  - Remember at the end of chapter 10 Paul says he became all things to all men, seeking to win them over to Christ
  - Paul was willing to set aside any personal privilege or freedom if necessary to be more effective in serving Christ
  - He did these things gladly, and he asks other Christians to see ministry and liberty in a similar way
- Secondly, Paul offers the church a praise concerning their willingness to hold firmly to certain traditions Paul delivered to them during his visit
  - For us, the word "tradition" can carry a negative sense
    - Some religions rely on tradition to an unhealthy extent
    - Relying on tradition instead of following the Lord
  - But at other times, traditions can be good and useful if they are consistent with the word of God
  - They can teach godliness or guide our conduct in helpful ways
- In this case, the word for traditions in Greek refers to something handed down as a honored practice
  - These are things worthy of respect and practice
    - And Paul says the Corinthians showed the appropriate respect for traditions Paul handed down to them
    - They observed them as taught and they stuck with them even after Paul left
  - Remember, the Corinthian church was the first Greek church in history
    - They had little prior exposure to Jewish thought and practice
    - They knew little or nothing of the promised Messiah
    - Meanwhile, they had a culture replete with pagan traditions and practices they needed to unlearn
    - We can't underestimate how difficult this transition can be for any culture unfamiliar with the God of Israel or Christianity

- Christians have traditions that God's word calls us to observe and hand down
  - Practices like baptism, the Lord's supper and the gathering together
  - These things are called traditions in the sense that they are cherished rituals handed down from generation to generation
  - But they are not manmade traditions, so they are not optional or unimportant
  - They have been handed down because they teach important spiritual lessons or witness to our faith
- We call these things tradition because they come with some degree of flexibility in the way the ritual is observed
  - For example, baptism requires immersion in water, but it makes no difference it's a pool, river, lake or bathtub
  - The Lord's Supper requires the elements of bread and the pressing of grapes, but it makes no difference the form either takes
  - In all cases, our only priority should be whether the proper message is being delivered through the observance of the tradition
  - If the form of our observance distorts or changes the message, then we have ventured too far away and violated the tradition
- Paul says the Corinthians have been good to adopt and hold to the Christians traditions he delivered
  - But in a couple of cases, the Corinthians were allowing their pursuit of liberty to interfere their practice of these traditions and thereby distort the messages
    - Paul will address two such examples in this chapter
    - We'll look at one example today and the other next week
  - In v. 3 Paul moves directly into a discussion of the first tradition

**1Cor. 11:3** But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

- Paul says God is the Head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman
  - Paul is speaking concerning the administration of the family
    - Let's look at each item on the list
    - I've reordered Paul's list a little so it moves from top to bottom
  - First, the Father is the Head of the Son, Christ
    - This is an important principle of the Trinity
    - We know God to be Three Persons and yet One God, which is a mystery in our limited understanding
    - No One Person of the Godhead created any other member
    - All Three coexisted from before the beginning, we're told in scripture
    - We can see all three present in the very opening verse of Genesis
  - Nevertheless, we also find a distinction of roles within the Godhead
    - For example, the Son obeys Father, while the Father instructs the Son
    - The Father gives a Bride to His Son, while the Son presents the Bride to the Father spotless
    - The Son gives His Spirit to us, while the Spirit leads us to the Son
    - The Son prays to the Father, while the Father glorifies His Son
      - And so on...
    - These roles imply a certain hierarchy
    - So Paul reminds the church that even Christ respects and honors the authority of the Father as His Head
- Moving down the chain of authority, Paul says Christ is the Head of every man
  - The word for man is *aner*, which is the word for husband
    - So we see Paul is talking about leadership in a family
    - He isn't talking about society in general

- This is a discussion about the leadership structure in a single household
- So a husband answers to Christ for his decisions and his leadership in his home
  - Christ's headship will be most clearly evident at the man's judgment when the Lord will pass judgment on how he cared spiritually for his family
  - But Christ's authority over a husband doesn't wait for that moment
  - Everyday the Lord is working through His Spirit to guide Christian husbands to love and lead their wives and children
    - To be the teacher in the home
    - To model obedience to Christ and His word
    - To patiently guide and even discipline his family to ensure godliness reigns
  - Husbands bear this responsibility and they can't avoid or delegate it
- Finally, Paul says the man is the head of a woman
  - Once again, Paul uses the word for husband here
    - Also notice Paul doesn't say a husband is the head of every woman
    - In other words, a husband has leadership authority over his wife and children obviously
    - But men in general are not automatically over all woman
    - Outside a family, men and women operate in equal terms
  - Within a single family, however, there is a hierarchy that God Himself has directed for good purposes
    - A husband has the responsibility, the privilege and burden for the spiritual welfare of his family
    - And the family, both wife and children, are commanded by scripture to honor and respect the man's role as leader

- We find plenty of other places where this truth is echoed

[Col. 3:18](#) Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

[Eph. 5:22](#) Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

[Eph. 5:23](#) For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.

[Eph. 5:24](#) But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

- The command for a wife to respect her husband's leadership role is not contingent upon the husband's good performance
  - Regardless of how well a husband leads, a wife is commanded to do her best to respect his authority in the home
  - In fact, the Bible teaches that a wife can best encourage her husband to live up to his leadership responsibilities by remaining submitted to his authority despite his failings

[1Pet. 3:1](#) In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives,

[1Pet. 3:2](#) as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.

- The principle is similar to the one we apply to children and parents
  - No matter how fallible parents may be, a child is forever commanded to honor the parent and submit to their authority at least as long as they live in the home
  - Only in circumstances when the parent is abusive or dangerously neglectful do they forfeit their authority
  - Likewise, only in extreme circumstances when a husband crosses the line to become abusive or reckless should a wife consider challenging his authority
- Interestingly, Paul doesn't take a lot of time at this point to reinforce this truth
  - His statement in v.3 is given more as a reminder to the church of past teaching
    - Instead, Paul moves forward in the next verse to connect this spiritual truth to a tradition he wants to reinforce

**1Cor. 11:4** Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.

**1Cor. 11:5** But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.

- In vs.4-5 Paul reminds the church of the tradition for wearing various head coverings, whether men or women
  - In Paul's day, the Jewish and Christian cultural tradition was that men never wear head coverings in worship while women always wore a covering
    - Paul says for a man to go against this tradition disgraces his head
    - The Greek word for head is the same in every place we've seen it used in this chapter
    - It's the same Greek word in v.3 as it is in v.4
  - The word head has two meanings in Greek
    - It can mean your skull of course
    - But it can also mean a person of authority, as in Christ is the head of every man
    - Paul uses the word in both senses in v.4
  - Paul says that any many who wears a covering on his physical head is disgracing Christ, Who is his authority
    - Likewise, a wife who arrives in church without a head covering is disgracing her head, that is her husband
    - In fact, Paul says a wife who would dare to appear in church without a head covering is as disgraceful to her husband as a wife who shaved her head entirely!
    - Why are these behaviors so problematic?
    - And is Paul expecting all Christians everywhere to observe these rules, including us today?
- Before we can answer these questions, we must recognize the relationship between the tradition and the message they are communicating

- Remember, we said that traditions, even those mandated by scripture, exist to edify, educate and witness concerning a central truth
  - They are not magic or hocus pocus, and they don't exist for their own sake
  - We aren't called to observe them in a mindless, ritualistic manner
  - We are supposed to follow a tradition with an appreciation of the underlying message it's trying to communicate
  - And in some cases, we may need to modify the ritual observance to better reflect the message in a changing culture
  - In short, the message takes precedence over form in any tradition
- So before we can determine what aspects of the tradition of head coverings would apply today, we first need to ask what message did a head covering send in Paul's day
  - And in the next passage Paul explains the importance of these things in his day and culture

**1Cor. 11:6** For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.

**1Cor. 11:7** For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.

**1Cor. 11:8** For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man;

**1Cor. 11:9** for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.

**1Cor. 11:10** Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

- In Paul's day, a woman's choice of whether she wore a head covering or how she wore her hair carried certain message
  - Specifically, failing to wear a head covering in the worship communicated she felt was an equal in authority with her husband
    - The head covering was a symbol that declared, "I am submitted to someone else."



- So if a married woman dispensed with her head covering, she was declaring loud and clear she was no longer submitted to her husband
- She was saying that she lacked respect for her husband's authority
- That's way Paul says in v.5 that such a woman disgraces her husband (her head)
- Any woman who did such a thing knew full well what she was doing and how her choice would be interpreted
  - What would be communicated if you were on trial for a serious crime and you chose to show up in court wearing shorts, flip flops while chewing gum loudly throughout the proceedings
  - Do you think the judge would understand you were showing the court contempt?
  - That's what it meant for a woman to intentionally reject a head covering
- Paul says if a woman was willing to defy the head covering tradition, she might as well shave her head
  - Paul is referring to another, similar tradition that expected a woman to grow her hair long
    - If a woman chose to shave her head, she was sending a not-so-subtle message that she wanted to be viewed as an equal to a man
    - Prostitutes usually cut their hair very short, as a way of advertising what kind of woman they were to their customers
    - Also, the Law required that a woman caught in the act of adultery was required to have her hair cut off
  - So Paul challenges any woman who wants to protest against submission by saying don't make your protest in a subtle way...go all the way
    - Paul says just shave your head and make sure everyone knows your true heart
    - He says this to shame them for setting aside these traditions without giving a thought to the greater good of the body

- Perhaps some women began to defy the tradition out of a misguided view of liberty
- Whatever their purpose in it, their behavior ignored an important tradition engrained in the culture
- So it sent an unavoidable message of defiance
- And then Paul moves to explain the full message behind the tradition
  - The tradition of wearing head coverings was a testimony in Paul's day to the order of Creation
    - In v.7 Paul says God created man from nothing and in His own image
      - This is a testimony to God's power brings Him glory
    - So a tradition arose for men to leave their head uncovered as they worship to symbolize there is nothing between them and the Lord
    - This tradition reflects the man as the chief authority in the home as God designed the family
  - But when God created Woman as a companion for Adam, He created her from Adam's flesh
    - God says a wife finds her chief purpose in the family in desiring, supporting and helping her husband
    - Her creation from Adam's body is a testimony of this intimate relationship with and spiritual dependence upon her husband
    - So Paul says in v.9 that a wife is to the glory of her husband in the sense that she brings honor to her husband by submitting to his authority
    - Therefore a tradition arose for a woman to wear a head covering in worship as a testimony that she is covered or protected by her husband
  - Therefore, Paul says a woman ought to have this symbol of the man's authority on her head when worshipping
    - She was expected to keep this tradition because if she didn't, she would communicate a defiant attitude

- Think of it like table manners
  - We eat with forks and knives because it's a tradition
  - And if we purposely defied the tradition, it would offend others unnecessarily
  - So we keep the tradition because we agree with the principle of showing concern and kindness for others
- Of course this tradition says nothing about a woman's access to the Lord or her relationship with the Lord
    - No woman is required to work through a man in reaching the Lord
      - And women are not lesser members of the body of Christ
      - Paul makes that clear that men and women are equals in spiritual terms

**[1Cor. 11:11](#)** However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.

**[1Cor. 11:12](#)** For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.

**[1Cor. 11:13](#)** Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

**[1Cor. 11:14](#)** Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him,

**[1Cor. 11:15](#)** but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

**[1Cor. 11:16](#)** But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

- God has designed reproduction so that both man and woman are equally important to the process
  - Ensuring that no man can say he isn't dependent on a woman and vice versa
  - Every man had a mother and every woman had a father
  - And in that way, Paul says we all trace our origins to God

- But in the way God designed men and women, Paul says we can see clear, physical signs that God knowingly made men and women differently
  - Men have traditionally kept short hair and women have traditionally values long hair
  - These traditions have existed from Adam and Eve until today
- Paul says these differences were designed by God to reflect the differences in the family roles
  - A woman is glorified by having a covering of hair
  - While men are dishonored by having a covering of hair
  - These things are tradition based on the physical differences
  - And these things send a message about God's design for spiritual authority in the family
- So the big question for us...do we still share an obligation to observe this tradition?
  - The answer is it depends
    - If we find ourselves in a culture where head coverings still carry this meaning, then we should observe the tradition
    - There are some places in the world and some Christian communities even in this country where these traditions persist
    - If we are in these settings, then Paul's instructions are fully appropriate for us
  - In many other places, though, the traditional meaning of head coverings has been forgotten
    - So that today if a woman were to wear a head covering, few would understand its meaning
    - More importantly, if a woman fails to wear a head covering, no one assumes she is defying her husband's authority
    - Our customs have changed to the point that the tradition is no longer meaningful
  - Is it wrong for a church to maintain this custom?

- No. A church body certainly has freedom to resurrect this tradition and asks women to observe head out of respect for its meaning
  - On the other hand, other churches are equally free to pay no attention to head coverings
  - Because the Biblical message of submission isn't being undermined in the process
- Not every tradition can be set aside entirely, but I believe this is one that can be
    - The message of wives living in submission to husbands will never change
      - But how we choose to demonstrate that truth has and will change over time
      - If we are chained to the ritual rather than to the message, we are at risk of becoming slaves to legalistic rules divorced from any meaning
    - Instead, we want to remain focused on the teaching behind anything we practice