

## 1 Corinthians 11—Biblical Headship

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. Rev. John Pringle (The Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. I, 348-363, emphasis added, English updated.

### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

2. “Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered *them* to you.”

*Now I praise you.* He passes on now to another subject—to instruct the Corinthians what decorum ought to be observed in the sacred assemblies [i.e., public worship and church meetings]. For as a man’s dress or gesture has in some cases the effect of disfiguring, and in others of adorning him, so all actions are set off to advantage by decorum, and are vitiated by the lack of it. Much, therefore, depends on decorum and that not merely for securing for our actions gracefulness and beauty, but also to accustom our minds to propriety.

While this is true in a general way as to everything, it holds especially as to sacred things; for what contempt, and, eventually, what barbarism will be incurred, if we do not preserve dignity in the Church, by conducting ourselves honorably and becomingly? Hence he prescribes some things that are connected with public order, by which sacred assemblies are rendered honorable. But in order to prepare them the more for obedience, he commends, in the outset, their obedience in the past, inasmuch as they observed his ordinances; for inasmuch as he *had begotten* that Church to the Lord (1 Corinthians 4:15), he had delivered to them a certain system, by which it was to be governed.

By retaining this, the Corinthians gave reason to hope, that they would also in the future be docile. It is surprising, however, that, while he now bestows on them this commendation, he had previously blamed them for many things. Even more, if we consider the state of the Church, such as has been previously described, they were far from deserving this praise. I respond, that there were some that were infected with those vices which he had previously reproved, and indeed, some with one, others with another; but, in the meantime, the form which he had prescribed to them had been retained by the entire body. For there is no inconsistency in saying, that very many sins, and of various kinds, prevail among a particular people—some cheating, others plundering—some envying, others quarrelling, and another class guilty of fornication—while, at the same time, in respect of the public form of the Church, the institutions of Christ and His Apostles are maintained.

This will appear more clearly when we come to see what Paul means by *traditions*; and independently of this, it is necessary to speak of this word, for the purpose of replying to Papists, who arm themselves with this passage for the purpose of defending their traditions. It is a common maxim among them, that the doctrine of the Apostles consists partly of writings and partly of traditions<sup>1</sup>. Under this *second* department [i.e., traditions] they include not merely certain foolish superstitions and puerile ceremonies, with which

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<sup>1</sup> The Roman Catholic Church defines that word of God as consisting of Scripture and church tradition; Protestantism defines the word of God as consisting of Scripture alone, the Bible alone.

they are stuffed, but also all kinds of gross abominations, directly contrary to the plain word of God. Under traditions, they also include their tyrannical laws, which are mere torments to men's consciences. In this way there is nothing that is so foolish, nothing so absurd—in short, nothing so monstrous, as not to have shelter under this pretext, and to be painted over with this varnish. As Paul, therefore, makes mention here of *traditions*, they seize, as they are accustomed to do, on this little word, with the view of making Paul the author of all those abominations, which we set aside by plain declaration of Scripture.

### ***Proper church government***

I do not deny, that there were certain traditions of the Apostles that were not committed to writing, but I do not admit that they were parts of doctrine, or related to things necessary for salvation.

What then? They were connected with order and government. For we know that every Church has liberty to frame for itself a form of government that is suitable and profitable for it, because the Lord has not prescribed anything definite. Thus Paul, the first founder of the Corinthian Church, had also framed for its regulation pious and suitable enactments—that *all things might be done decently and in order*, as he afterwards enjoins (1 Corinthians 14:40).

But what has this to do with those silly trifles of ceremonies, which are to be seen in Popery?<sup>2</sup> What has it to do with a worse than Jewish superstition? What has it to do with a tyranny worthy of Phalaris<sup>3</sup>, by which they torture miserable consciences? What has it to do with so many monstrous rites of idolatry? For the foundation of all right enactment was this: to observe the moderation that Paul made use of—not to compel persons to follow their enactments<sup>4</sup>, while, in the meantime, contriving everything that might strike their fancy, but to require that they should be *imitated, in so far as they are imitators of Christ*. But now, after having had the audacity to criticize everything agreeably to their own humor, to demand obedience from all is exceedingly absurd. Farther, we must know that Paul commends their obedience in the past, in order that he may render them docile also for the time to come.

### ***Biblical headship***

3. “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman *is* the man; and the head of Christ *is* God.”

*But I would have you know.* It is an old proverb: “**Evil manners beget good laws.**” As the rite here treated of had not been previously called into question, Paul had given no enactment respecting it. The error of the Corinthians was the occasion of his showing, what part it was suitable to act in this matter. With the view of proving, that it is an inappropriate thing for women to appear in a public assembly with their heads uncovered, and, on the other hand, for men to pray or prophesy with their heads *covered*, he sets out

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<sup>2</sup> French, “The silly ceremonies and fooleries that are to be seen in Popery at this day.”

<sup>3</sup> French, “That worse than barbarous cruelty.” Phalaris, the tyrant of Agrigentum in Sicily (Italy), was infamous for his cruelty. Cicero on more than one occasion employs the term *Phalarismus* to denote excessive cruelty. See Cic. Att. vii. 12, and Fam. vii. 11.—Ed.

<sup>4</sup> French, “Their decrees and determinations.”

with noticing the arrangements that are divinely established. He says, that *as Christ is subject to God as his head, so is the man subject to Christ, and the woman to the man.*

We shall afterwards see, how he comes to infer from this, that women ought to have their heads covered. Let us, for the present, take notice of those four gradations which he points out. **God, then, occupies the first place:** Christ holds the *second* place. How so? Inasmuch as He has in our flesh made Himself subject to the Father, for, apart from this, being of one essence with the Father, He is His equal. Let us, therefore, bear it in mind, that this is spoken of Christ as mediator. **He is, I say, inferior to the Father, inasmuch as He assumed our nature, that He might be the first-born among many brethren.**

There is somewhat more difficulty in what follows. Here the man is placed in an intermediate position between Christ and the woman, so that Christ is not the head of the woman. Yet the same Apostle teaches us elsewhere (**Galatians 3:28**) that *in Christ there is neither male nor female*. Why then does he make a distinction here, which in that passage he does away with?

I answer, that the solution of this depends on the connection in which the passages occur. When he says that there is no difference between the man and the woman, he is treating of Christ's spiritual kingdom, in which individual distinctions are not regarded, or made any account of; for **it has nothing to do with the body, and has nothing to do with the outward relationships of mankind, but has to do solely with the mind**—on which account he *declares* that there is no difference, even between *bond* and *free*. In the meantime, however, he does not disturb civil order or honorary distinctions, which cannot be dispensed with in ordinary life. Here, on the other hand, he reasons respecting outward propriety and decorum—which is a part of ecclesiastical polity [church government].

Hence, as regards spiritual connection in the sight of God, and inwardly in the conscience, Christ is the head of the man and of the woman without any distinction, because, as to that, there is no regard paid to male or female; but **as regards external arrangement and political decorum**, the man follows Christ and the woman the man, so that they are not upon the same footing, but, on the contrary, **this inequality exists.**

Should any one ask, what connection marriage has with Christ, I answer, that Paul speaks here of that sacred union of pious persons, of which Christ is the officiating priest, and He in whose name it is consecrated.

#### **Male heads of households**

4. "Every man praying or prophesying, having *his* head covered, dishonors his head."

*Every man praying.* Here there are two propositions. The first relates to the *man*, the other to the *woman*. He says that the *man* commits an offense against Christ his head, if he *prays or prophesies with his head covered*. Why? Because he is subject to Christ, with this understanding, that **he is to hold the first place in the government of the house—for the father of the family is like a king in his own house.** Hence the glory of God shines forth in him, in consequence of the authority with which he is invested.

If the man covers his head, he lets himself down from that preeminence which God had assigned to him, so as to be in subjection. Thus the honor of Christ is infringed upon. For

example, If the person whom the prince has appointed as his lieutenant, does not know how to maintain his proper station, and instead of this exposes his dignity to contempt on the part of persons in the lowest station, does he not bring dishonor upon his prince? **In like manner, if the *man* does not keep his own station—if he is not subject to Christ in such a way as to preside over his own family with authority, he obscures, to that extent, the glory of Christ, which shines forth in the well-regulated order of marriage.**

The *covering*, as we shall see before long, is an emblem of authority intermediate and interposed.

*Prophesying* I take here to mean—declaring the mysteries of God for the edification of the hearers (as afterwards in 1 Corinthians 14), as *praying* means preparing a form of prayer, and taking the lead, as it were, of all the people—which is the part of the public teacher<sup>5</sup>, for Paul is not arguing here as to every kind of prayer, but as to solemn prayer in public.

### ***The man's role***

Let us, however, bear in mind, that in this matter the error is merely insofar as decorum is violated, and the distinction of rank which God has established, is broken in upon. For we must not be so scrupulous as to look on it as a criminal thing for a teacher to have a cap on his head, when addressing the people from the pulpit. Paul means nothing more than this—that it should appear that the man has authority, and that the woman is under subjection, and this is secured when the man uncovers his head in the view of the Church, though he should afterwards put on his cap again from fear of catching cold.

In short, the *one* rule to be observed here is to *decorum* [appropriate behavior or conduct]. If *that* is secured, Paul requires nothing farther.

### ***Paul is arguing from the lesser sin to the greater sin.***

**5.** “But every woman that prays or prophesies with *her* head uncovered dishonors her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. **6.** For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.”

*Every woman praying or prophesying.* Here we have the *second* proposition—that women ought to *have their heads covered* when they *pray or prophesy*; otherwise they *dishonor their head*. For as the *man* honors his head by showing his liberty, so the *woman*, by showing her subjection. Hence, on the other hand, if the woman uncovers her head, she shakes off subjection—involving contempt of her husband.

It may seem, however, to be superfluous for Paul to forbid the woman to prophesy with her head uncovered, while elsewhere he wholly prohibits women from speaking in the Church. In **1 Timothy 2:12**, Paul declares, “And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence” (NKJ; cf. 1 Tim. 2:9-15). It would not, therefore, be allowable for them to prophesy even with a covering on their head, and hence it follows that it is to no purpose that he argues here as to a covering.

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<sup>5</sup> French, “Of the minister and teacher of the Church.”

It may be replied, that the Apostle, by here condemning the one, does not commend the other. For when he reproveth them for prophesying with their head uncovered, he at the same time does not give them permission to prophesy in some other way, but rather delays his condemnation of that vice to another passage, namely in **1 Corinthians 14**. In this reply there is nothing amiss, though at the same time it might suit sufficiently well to say, that the Apostle requires women to show their modesty—not merely in a place in which the whole Church is assembled, but also in any more dignified assembly, either of matrons [ladies] or of men, such as are sometimes convened in private houses.

*For it is all one as if she were shaven.* He now maintains from other considerations, that it is unsuitable for women to have their heads bare. **Nature itself, he says, abhors it. To see a woman shaven is a spectacle that is disgusting and monstrous.** Hence we infer that the woman *has her hair given her for a covering.*

***Long hair is not a sufficient head covering.***

Should any one now object, that her hair is enough, as being a natural covering, Paul says that it is *not*, for it is such a covering as requires another thing to be made use of for covering *it*. And hence a conjecture is drawn, with some appearance of probability—that women who had beautiful hair were accustomed to uncover their heads for the purpose of showing off their beauty. It is not, therefore, without good reason that Paul, as a remedy for this vice, sets before them the opposite idea—that they be regarded as remarkable for impropriety [i.e., improperly done in bad taste, unseemliness], rather than for what is an incentive to lust<sup>6</sup>.

7. “For a man indeed ought not to cover *his* head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of the man.”

*The man ought not to cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God.* The same question may now be proposed respecting the *image*, as formerly respecting the *head*. For both sexes were created in the image of God, and Paul exhorts women no less than men to be formed anew, according to that image.

The *image*, however, of which he is now speaking, relates **to the order of marriage**, and hence it belongs to the present life, and is not connected with conscience. The simple solution is this—that he does not treat here of innocence and holiness, which are equally becoming in men and women, but of the distinction, which **God has conferred upon the man, so as to have superiority over the woman.** In this superior order of dignity the glory of God is seen, as it shines forth in every kind of superiority.

*The woman is the glory of the man.* There is no doubt that **the woman is a distinguished ornament of the man;** for it is a great honor that God has appointed her to the man as the partner of his life, and a helper to him<sup>7</sup>, and has made her subject to him as the body is to the head. For what Solomon affirms as to a careful wife—that *she is a crown to her husband* (Proverbs 12:4), is true of the whole sex, if we look to the

<sup>6</sup> French, “St. Paul, with the view of remedying this vice, sets forward quite the reverse of what appeared to them—saying, that so far from there being a beauty in this to allure men to lust, it is rather a thing that is ugly and unseemly.”

<sup>7</sup> French, “To be a companion to the man, to live with him, and to aid him.”

appointment of God, which Paul here commends, showing that **the woman was created for this purpose—that she might be a distinguished ornament of the man.**

8. “For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. 9. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.”

*For the man is not from the woman.* He establishes by *two* arguments the pre-eminence, which he had assigned to men above women. The **first** is, that as the woman derives her origin from the man, **she is therefore inferior in rank.** The **second** is, that as the woman was created for the sake of the man, **she is therefore subject to him,** as the work ultimately produced is to its cause.<sup>8</sup>

That the man is the beginning of the woman and the end for which she was made, is evident from the law (Genesis 2:18). It is not good for a man to be alone. Let us make for him a helper suitable for him, etc. Farther, God took one of Adam’s ribs and formed Eve (Genesis 2:21, 22).

10. “For this cause ought the woman to have power on *her* head because of the angels.”

*For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head*<sup>9</sup>. From that authority he draws an argument<sup>10</sup> in favor of outward decorum. **“She is subject,” says he, “let her then wear a token of subjection.”** In the term *power*, there is an instance of metonymy<sup>11</sup>, for he means a token by which she declares herself to be under the power of her husband; and it is a covering, whether it be a robe, or a **veil**<sup>12</sup>, or any other kind of covering.

It is asked, whether he speaks of *married* women exclusively, for there are some that restrict to *them* [wives] what Paul here teaches, on the ground that it does not belong to virgins to be under the authority of a husband. It is however a mistake, for Paul looks beyond this—to **God’s eternal law, which has made the female sex subject to the authority of men. On this account all women are born, that they may acknowledge themselves inferior in consequence of the superiority of the male sex.** Otherwise it were an inconclusive argument that Paul has drawn from *nature*, in saying that it were not the least bit more appropriate for a woman to *have her head uncovered* than to be *shaven*—this being applicable to virgins also.

*Because of the angels.* . . . it is asked, why it is that Paul would require women to have their heads covered *because of the angels*—for what has this to do with them? Some answer: “Because they are present on occasion of the prayers of believers, and on this account are spectators of unseemliness [inappropriate actions], should there be any on such occasions.” But what need is there for philosophizing with such refinement? We know that angels are in attendance, also, upon Christ as their head, and minister to Him.

<sup>8</sup> French, “As a work fitted for some design is inferior to its cause and the design for which it is made.”

<sup>9</sup> French, “She ought to have upon her head a token that she is under authority.”

<sup>10</sup> French, “An argument and inference.”

<sup>11</sup> French, “It is literally in the Greek, The woman ought to have power upon her head. But in the word *power* there is a figure called metonymy.” Metonymy is a figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated.

<sup>12</sup> French, “**It is a covering of the head, whether it be a hood [veil], or a kerchief [a woman’s square scarf], or a coif [a tight-fitting cap worn under a veil], or anything of that kind.**”

**When, therefore, women venture upon such liberties, as to usurp for themselves the token of authority, they make their baseness manifest to the angels.** This, therefore, was said by way of amplifying, as if he had said, “If women uncover their heads, not only Christ, but all the angels too, will be witnesses of the outrage.”

And this interpretation suits well with the Apostle’s design. He is treating here of different ranks. **Now he says that, when women assume a higher place than becomes them, they gain this by it—that they discover [reveal] their impudence<sup>13</sup> in the view of the angels of heaven.**

***Man is the head; woman is the body.***

11. “Nevertheless neither is the man independent of the woman, neither the woman independent of the man, in the Lord.”

*But neither is the man independent of the woman.* This is added partly as a check upon men, that they may not insult over women<sup>14</sup>; and partly as a consolation to women, that they may not feel dissatisfied with being under subjection. “The male sex (he says) has a distinction over the female sex, with this understanding, that they ought to be connected together by mutual benevolence, for the one cannot live without the other. If they are separated, they are like the mutilated members of a mangled body. Let them, therefore, be connected with each other by the bond of mutual duty<sup>15</sup>.”

When he says, *in the Lord*, he by this expression calls the attention of believers to the appointment of the Lord, while the wicked look to nothing beyond pressing necessity. For profane men, if they can conveniently live unmarried, despise the whole [female] sex, and do not consider that they are under obligations to women by the appointment and decree of God.

The pious, on the other hand, acknowledge that the male sex is but half of the human race. They ponder the meaning of that statement—*God created man: male and female He created them* (Genesis 1:27; 5:2). Thus they, of their own accord, acknowledge themselves to be debtors to the weaker sex.

Pious women, in like manner, reflect upon their obligation.<sup>16</sup> **Thus the man has no standing without the woman, for that would be the head severed from the body; nor has the woman without the man, for that were a body without a head. “Let, therefore, the man perform to the woman the office of the head in respect of ruling her, and let the woman perform to the man the office of the body in respect of assisting him, and that not merely in the married state, but also in celibacy; for I do not speak of cohabitation merely, but also of civil offices, for which there is occasion even in the unmarried state.”**

<sup>13</sup> Sauciness, sassiness, offensively bold behavior.

<sup>14</sup> French, “That they may not hold women in disdain and derision.”

<sup>15</sup> French, “By this tie of mutual assistance and amity [friendship].”

<sup>16</sup> French, “Think of their duty, and of their being under obligation, on their part, to men.”

If you are inclined rather to refer this to the whole sex in general, I do not object to this, though, as Paul directs his discourse to individuals, he appears to point out the particular duty of each.

**12.** “For as the woman *is* of the man, even so *is* the man also by the woman; but all things of God.”

**13.** “Judge for yourselves: is it proper that a woman pray to God uncovered? **14.** Does not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man has long hair, it is a shame to him? **15.** But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her: for *her* hair is given her for a covering.”

*As the woman came from man.* If this is one of the reasons why the man has superiority—that the woman was taken out of him, there will be, in like manner, this motive to friendly connection—that the male sex cannot maintain and preserve itself without the aid of women. For this remains a settled point—that ***it is not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18)***. This statement of Paul may, it is true, be viewed as referring to propagation, because human beings are propagated not by men alone, but by men and women; but I understand it as meaning this also—that the woman is a needful help to the man, inasmuch as a solitary life is not expedient [beneficial] for man. This decree of God exhorts us to cultivate mutual intercourse.

*But all things are from God.* God is the Source of both sexes, and hence both of them ought with humility to accept and maintain the condition which the Lord has assigned to them. **Let the *man* exercise his authority with moderation, and not insult over the woman who has been given to him as his partner. Let the *woman* be satisfied with her state of subjection, and not take it amiss that she is made inferior to the more distinguished sex. Otherwise they will both throw off the yoke of God, who has not without good reason appointed this distinction of ranks.**

When it is said that the man and the woman, when they are lacking in their duty to each other, are **rebels against the authority of God**, the statement is a more serious one than if Paul had said, that they do injury to one another.

*Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering.*

He again sets forth *nature* as the mistress of decorum, and what was at that time in common use by universal consent and custom—even among the Greeks—he speaks of as being *natural*, for it was not always reckoned a disgrace for men to have long hair<sup>17</sup>.

Historical records bear, that in all countries in ancient times, that is, in the first ages, men wore long hair. Hence also the poets, in speaking of the ancients, are accustomed to

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<sup>17</sup> It is remarked by President Edwards, that “the emphasis used, *nature itself*, shows that the Apostle does not mean custom, but nature in the proper sense. It is true it was long custom that made having the head covered a token of subjection, and a feminine habit or appearance, as it is custom that makes any outward action or word a sign or signification of anything; but nature itself, nature in its proper sense, teaches that it is a shame for a man to appear with the established signs of the female sex. Nature itself shows it to be a shame for a father to bow down or kneel to his own child or servant, because bowing down is, by custom, an established token of subjection and submission.” Edwards on Original Sin, part ii., chap. iii., sec. 3.—*Editor*



apply to them the common epithet of *unshorn*.<sup>18</sup> It was not until a late period that barbers began to be employed at Rome—about the time of Africanus the elder [236-183 B.C.]. And at the time when Paul wrote these things, the practice of having the hair shorn had not yet come into use in the provinces of Gaul [France] or in Germany. Nay more, it would have been reckoned an inappropriate [vulgar] thing for men, no less than for women, to be shorn or shaven; but as in Greece it was reckoned an inappropriate [vulgar] thing for a man to allow his hair to grow long, so that those who did so were remarked as effeminate, he reckons as *nature* a custom that had come to be confirmed.<sup>19</sup>

**16.** “But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom; neither do the Churches of God.”

*But if any man seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.* A *contentious* person is one whose humor inclines him to stir up disputes, and does not care what happens to the truth. Of this description are all who, without any necessity, abolish good and useful customs—raise disputes respecting matters that are not doubtful—who do not yield to reasonings—who cannot endure that any one should be above them. Of this description, also, are those would be singular persons who, from a foolish affectation, aim at some new and unusual way of acting. Such persons Paul does not reckon worthy of being replied to, inasmuch as contention is a pernicious thing, and ought, therefore, to be banished from the Churches.

By this he teaches us, that those who are obstinate and fond of quarrelling, should rather be restrained by authority than confuted by lengthened disputations. For you will never have an end of contentions, if you are disposed to contend with a combative person until you have vanquished him; for though vanquished a hundred times, he would argue still. Let us therefore carefully mark this passage, that we may not allow ourselves to be carried away with needless disputations, provided at the same time we know how to distinguish *contentious* persons. For we must not always reckon as *contentious* the man who does not acquiesce in our decisions, or who ventures to contradict us; but when temper and obstinacy show themselves, let us then say with Paul, that *contentions are at variance with the custom of the Church*<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Instances of this occur in “Ovid, *Fast.* ii. 30, and in *Hor.*, *Od.* 2, 15, 11. Gaul, to the north of the Alps, was called *Gallia comata*, from the inhabitants *wearing their hair long*. Homer applies to the Greeks in his time the epithet of *long-haired*. *Hom.* *Il.*, ii. 11.—*Ed.*

<sup>19</sup> French, “He gives the appellation of Nature to this custom, already confirmed by length of time and common use.”

<sup>20</sup> French, “That it is not the custom of the Church to enter into strifes and contentions.”