

1 Corinthians 11: An Introduction

The **Context** of the Chapter [1 Corinthians 11-14]

The First Epistle to the Corinthians can be divided into two parts:

- 1 Corinthians 1-6 concerns matters of which the apostle had *heard* (1.11). The two primary matters were “contentions” (factions) and “fornication” (5.1-13). Divisions amongst the saints was the primary matter of concern, for without a united company any other problems could not be put right. Paul had also heard of disorder in respect of *headship* and the *Lord’s Supper* (11), and of *false teaching* in respect of the doctrine of resurrection (15).
- 1 Corinthians 7-16 concerns matters of which the Corinthians had *enquired* of Paul (cf. 7.1). These are highlighted using the phrase “now concerning” (*peri de*): marriage (7.1-24), virgins (7.25-40), things sacrificed to idols (8.1-11.1), spiritual gifts and manifestations (12.1-14.40) and the collection for the saints (16.1-4).

1 Corinthians 11-14 is **one** unit dealing with order in the public gatherings of the assembly (11.16, 18). This is also obvious from the *chiastic* structure of the Greek (see below). Thus, the instructions of the whole section are governing order in a local church setting. Head coverings are not for a domestic scene, and neither can the Lord’s Supper be arranged on a holiday cruise! God is a God of order, and nowhere on earth should this be more evident than in the church of God (cf. 11.34; 14.40).

- A. The distinct roles of male and female in the assembly – head covered vs. uncovered (11.1-16)
B. An occasion to show love of Christ the head by consideration of others at the Lord’s Supper (11.17-34)
C. The love of Christ demonstrated by the functioning of gifts for the mutual benefit of others (12.1-31)
D. **LOVE - MOTIVATING FACTOR FOR ALL ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS IN THE ASSEMBLY** (13.1-13)
C. The love of Christ demonstrated by the functioning of gifts for the edification of others (14.1-25).
B. An occasion to show love of Christ the head by consideration of others at meetings for edification (14.26-33a)
A. The distinct roles of male and female in the assembly – silence vs. speaking (14.33b-40)

[Adapted from private correspondence with **David Vallance**]

The *inclusio* is framed by two references to the word of God: “ordinances” (11.2) and “commandments” (14.37). Why begin this long section of four chapters by declaring and developing the principle of headship? Because a full understanding of the principle of headship will lead to proper behaviour in the assembly.

The **Construction** of the Chapter [1 Corinthians 11]

1 Corinthians 11 clearly breaks into two sections joined by the parallel phrases, “I praise you” (v.2) and “I praise you not” (v.17). The *first* section deals with the **headship** of Christ (vv.2-16), whilst the *second* section is concerned with the **lordship** of Christ (vv.17-34). Each contains two symbols – the *uncovered head* of the man and the *covered head* of the woman (headship) and the *bread* and *cup* (lordship). If, as some teach, the first set of symbols are obsolete, then the second set of symbols must be too! Apart from baptism, there are no other *external* forms or symbols in this church age. All that was *physical* and sensuous under the OT economy has become largely *spiritual* in the NT. Nevertheless, these five symbols are intended to display the wisdom of God to angelic beings by willing submission of believers to divine order (cf. Ephesians 3.10; 1 Corinthians 11.10, 26).

It should be noted that when Paul deals with each subject in this chapter, he goes back to the **original**. With the matter of *headship*, he returns to Genesis 2, not Genesis 3. Headship was not instituted with the Fall. With the matter of *lordship* and the Lord’s Supper, he goes back to the very night it all started (v.23). Whether the headline of original creation or original institution, nothing must contradict what was established at the very beginning.

[Praise] A. Apostolic authority (11.2)

[Principle] B. *Theological* basis of headship and its symbols – uncovered and covered heads (11.3-6)

[Pattern] C. *Creatorial* basis of headship (11.7). Man had *priority* in creation (11.8-9)

D. **SYMBOL OF AUTHORITY NECESSARY “BECAUSE OF THE ANGELS”** (11.10)

[Pattern] C. *Creatorial* basis of headship. Interdependence – no *superiority* in creation (11.11-12)

[Propriety] B. *Natural* basis of headship and its symbols – short hair and long hair (11.13-15)

[Practice] A. Apostolic authority (11.16)

[Adapted from private correspondence with **David Vallance**]

The Principle of Headship

An Outline. The word “head” (v.3) is *kephalē*. It refers to a person’s physical head (e.g. Matthew **10.30**; **14.8**), but *figuratively* signifies a person in authority over another – as the head is the uppermost part of the human body. In the LXX, the word often refers to a leader or chief in a position of responsibility for others (e.g. Judges **11.11**; 2 Samuel **22.44**). The word does not demand inequality or inferiority.

Note the distinction between *headship* and *lordship*. Lordship is akin to *ownership*, **rule** and *forced* subjection to one’s will. Headship is *willing* subjection to another’s will – it is *order* and **role**. There are various spheres in which headship is exercised such as the home, local church and even within the Godhead. Though there is no difference in *essence* or *status* between divine persons, there *is* a difference in *role* and *responsibility*. Thus, Paul says, “the head of Christ is God”. For example, when Christ was on earth, Father and Son worked together in complete harmony of mind, will and purpose (cf. John **4.34**). The Lord Jesus willingly submitted to His Father’s will, even though it involved the shameful death of the cross. This is what God intends for mankind! That he should willingly submit his *free* will to *God’s* will – which is always for his best and blessing. Then the will of God would be done on *earth* as it is in *heaven*.

The headship of **Christ** is presented in *seven* ways. 1. “Head of the nations” (Psalm **18.43**). 2. “Head stone of the *corner*” (Psalm **118.22**; Matthew **21.42**). 3. “Head of every man” (1 Corinthians **11.3**). 4. “Head of the body, the church” (Colossians **1.18**; Ephesians **5.23**). 5. “Head of all principality and power” (Colossians **2.10**). 6. “Head over all” (Ephesians **1.22**; 1 Chronicles **29.11**). 7. *Federal* or *representative* Head (Romans **5**).

Different aspects of the headship of Christ are presented in these scriptures (above). In Ephesians and Colossians, **organic** headship is in view – there is a vital link between the *Head* (Christ) and His *body* (the church). The Head is responsible to maintain spiritual life and provide spiritual sustenance (e.g. Colossians **2.10, 19**). In turn, the body is responsible for submission, obedience and expression of the Head (e.g. Ephesians **5.24**). In 1 Corinthians, **administrative** headship is in view – and confined to authority over every *individual*, rather than the church as a *corporate* body.

The Origin. The principle of headship is part of the very *character* and *nature* of God. He therefore established it in His ordered creation and will use it to govern the world in the millennial reign of Christ.

- Mankind was made to exercise “dominion” over God’s creation (Genesis **1.26**) to ensure divine order was maintained in the garden. Man was to be a *representative* of God (image) and *resemble* God (likeness). Man and woman were jointly given a delegated authority to rule for God. Though equal, they could not do the work *alone*; they would *complement* one another. So, in the exercise of dominion, man and woman stand equal.
- But God made the man *first* and commanded him *before* the woman was made. Therefore, the man was given the responsibility of *leadership* and *authority* (headship), the woman of *willing submission* (helpership). She does not *supplant* (compete) but *supports* (complements). God even designed nature to teach the same principle – hence the general rule of *shorter hair* for men, and *longer hair* for women.¹
- In the Millennium, God will *restore* the perfect exercise of the headship principle (Ephesians **1.10**). Divine purpose will not be defeated. A Man and his bride will exercise dominion over all the earth (Ephesians **1.22-23**).

In Observation. In the local assembly, the principle of headship is restored, acknowledged, and displayed. As in the very beginning, God again has something on earth that reflects *who* He is, and *how* He works. Headship is displayed by the *uncovered* heads of the males, and *covered* heads of the females. It will also be in evidence by the *silence* of the females and *audible* contributions of the males (1 Corinthians **14.34-35**; 1 Timothy **2.8-15**).

David Gilliland notes (slightly adapted), “We are highly privileged to be able to implement the teaching of headship, and apply to our lives the very principle which God will employ to establish His authority universally and eternally! At that point no subversive element or adversary will be left remaining and then shall “the Son also Himself be subject unto Him that put all things under Him, that God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15.28). The teaching in these verses is not some incidental, unimportant, tangential piece of apostolic advice. This is the principle upon which the restoration of equilibrium to the universe depends. The principle which lies at the foundation of God’s redemption programme.”

¹ Such is the importance of the principle of headship, the devil sought to *undermine* it, Adam, being with Eve at the time, was *complacent* about it, and Eve *disobeyed* it (Genesis **3**).