

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 an 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 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 if 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 Christian traditions he delivered
 - But in a couple of cases, the Corinthians were allowing their pursuit of liberty to interfere with 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 the 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 a certain message
 - Specifically, failing to wear a head covering in the worship communicated she felt she 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 why 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 and 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 bringing 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, 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 lessor 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 valued 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 coverings 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