

Submission to Christ

1 Corinthians 11:1-6

Pastor Tim Melton

This text provides us a great opportunity to consider several important issues. One is the way we study the Bible. A second is the roles of a husband and wife towards each other. The third is our willingness to submit to the timeless truths of God.

The verses before us, at first glance, are somewhat confusing. We read them and are not sure what to do with them. Should women in the church be wearing head coverings? Are husbands the head of the wife? Are these verses to be taken literally or are they merely symbolic? Were they just for Bible times or do these teachings apply to today?

¹ Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Paul made a bold statement here. How many of us would be able to truthfully say this in all humility? Be like me. Imitate me, as I imitate Christ. Follow me as I follow Him. Walk in my footsteps as I walk in His footsteps. Just as the disciples walked with the physical Christ, who was the exact representation of the invisible God, Paul was their example of Christ since they could not physically walk with and see Jesus' example.

This is our role with our children or any others whom God has put under our spiritual care. They are to imitate our lives as we imitate the life of Christ. As followers of Christ, God is in the process of making each of us like Christ (Romans 8:28-29).

This is the idea of true discipleship. A disciple is not just a student who learns what their teacher knows. A disciple is one who becomes like their teacher. We are to become like Jesus so others can watch how we live and better understand how Jesus lived. This is only possible as the grace of God works in us.

At times we need to link ourselves to a mentor or role model who can lead us deeper into the faith. At other times we are to be the example or disciple of another who needs help growing in their faith. That

is the example we see in scripture. Moses and Joshua. Naomi and Ruth. Elijah and Elisha. Jesus and the twelve disciples. Barnabas and Paul.

Paul was merely doing with the Corinthians what he had instructed Timothy, one of his disciples, to do in 1 Timothy 4:12, ***"Be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity."*** This example was to be based firmly on the truths of the gospel that we find in scripture.

² Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.

Remember that the church in Corinth was experiencing difficulties. The church was less than three years old and already there were problems with divisions, false teaching, drunkenness and sexual immorality. It was a church of young believers who desperately needed Paul's mature spiritual example to lead them into the ways of Christ.

It was key that they remember Paul's example, that was built upon the traditions that Paul had taught them. The word "traditions" here was not referring to the Jewish traditions such as man-made laws or rituals that had been added by religious leaders throughout the years. It was referring to the timeless, God-given, teachings of the Christian faith. It was the truths from God's Word that the apostles passed on to the early churches.

God's Word is timeless, but never make the mistake of seeing it as old and irrelevant. Nothing is more relevant than the truth that our Creator has given to us, His creations. Today, we live in a world that loves what is trending, what is politically correct and what is popular. If we are not careful we drift away from the ancient boundary stones of scripture. We turn from the Spirit-revealed truth that we find in scripture and give in to beliefs that are more man-centered, culture-driven, self-serving and empty.

We are called to be people of the Word. Because of this I encourage you to be Berean (Acts 17:10-11), as we observe these somewhat puzzling verses about men's and women's roles and head coverings. Let's submit our hearts and minds to God's Word and seek His truths for our lives.

³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

This verse brings up a lot of questions. One may be asking, "Does this verse still apply to today or was this just for Bible times? Another might ask, "Does this apply if your spouse is not a believer in Christ?" Another may ask, "What if my husband is not submitting to Christ as his head?" Yet another may say, "What if my wife acts like she is the head?" Or maybe you are thinking, "Why can't the husband and wives just be equals?"

The culture around us is making it even more complicated with its ideas. Our culture is saying, "There is no difference between male and female. You can be whichever gender you want to be. You can define marriage however you want. God does not even exist. We do not have to follow what He says. It's your

life, do whatever you want.” With this in mind we must gain a broader understanding of what scripture says about this subject.

Before we go any further, I would like to lay out the biblical reason for marriage. As we think about marriage we must first understand its story. Genesis 1:26-27 tells us that only we, mankind, were created in the image of God. The Genesis account tells that Adam, the first man, was created by God, but even with all of the species of animals Adam could not find a helpmate. God had declared everything in His creation as “good”, except for this one point. In Genesis 2:18, God said, *“It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”* God then created a woman from Adam’s flesh and immediately declared these words, in Genesis 2:24, *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”*

God created man and woman in his image and brought them together as husband and wife. God created and ordained marriage as the foundational relational unit of the home.

Some would argue that marriage is a human idea born out of the necessity for survival. That it took on the form of man and woman because of the need for reproduction and the workforce that having children provides. Others would look at history and tell us that marriage is a manmade social structure that continues to evolve. They state facts about romance not being involved in the process until the last couple of centuries. That all marriages used to be arranged. That even the Jews used to practice polygamy. They cite these changes as proof that society can change marriage to be whatever they want it to be, but God created marriage and it is His to define. Yes, sin has tainted God’s plan for marriage. Yes, culture has affected the characteristics of relationships between husband and wife, but God created and ordained marriage in its original and intended form.

For help understanding marriage’s role we can look to Hebrews 8:5, where it talks of *“a copy and the shadow of heavenly things”*. It is the truth that God has created certain realities in this life to help us begin to understand the reality of heaven and our eternal relationship with Christ. One example was when God gave Moses the instructions to build the tabernacle. God told Moses to follow every detail because it was to be a replica, a copy of the holy place that exists in heaven. Marriage is an earthly copy of a spiritual and eternal reality as well. Marriage is an example of our relationship with Christ. Here are a few verses that refer to this type of relationship with God and Christ:

“For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.” (Isaiah 54:5)

“As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” (Isaiah 62:5)

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church.” (Ephesians 5:25)

Marriage is an earthly picture of Christ’s spiritual relationship with the church, the people of God. It is an intimate, permanent, sacrificial, covenant relationship based on unconditional love. One example that makes it even clearer is that of a Jewish Marriage Ceremony.

Jewish marriages were arranged. This normally began by a conversation between fathers. The first part of the marriage ceremony was the betrothal or engagement period. This is when the groom gave his future bride something of value, a ring, money or a document stating his intentions. After this commitment was made, the bride would remain in her father's home preparing herself for the wedding. During this time, she would keep herself pure. She would make her wedding gown and prepare herself for leaving her original family and relying on and sharing life with her new husband. She would forever set aside her interests or possible allegiances to all other men and set her heart on loving her future husband. During this time the bride is referred to as "consecrated", "sanctified" or set apart.

The groom would return to his father's house to prepare a place for her to live. That was normally done by building an additional room to his Father's house. The groom would return to get his bride once preparations were finished and his father gave his approval. The groom's return would be unexpected. The bride never knew when he would return. It could be next year, next month or in the next five minutes. Her responsibility was merely to be ready at all times for his coming.

As we hear this description of a Jewish marriage ceremony, we see its spiritual meaning in multiple places. The future groom invites the young woman to be his forever love, as Christ invites us to be His. The future groom gives a "deposit" as proof of his return, just as Christ gives us the Holy Spirit as proof of His. The groom goes to prepare a place for us, just as Christ has returned to heaven and prepares a place for us. While the future groom is gone, the bride grows in her allegiance to Him and sets herself apart from all other allegiances to other men. In the same way, a follower of Christ is to turn their heart away from sin and all other idols, while they wait for His return. We are to be sanctified, made holy for the sake of our beloved. In the end the groom's father determines when everything is ready, and the groom returns for His bride, just like at the end of the age when God the Father sends Christ to return to get His church.

John 14:1-3 shares these words of Jesus:

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

Marriage was created in the mind of God before time began. God knew that out of our selfishness and depravity, we would rebel and turn against him. He knew that He would send His perfect son as our Bridegroom, so that we could be reconciled to Him. He knew that He would invite us into an exclusive, covenant relationship that would be permanent and would be based on unconditional love. He knew that after we gave our lives to follow Jesus Christ, He would give us His Holy Spirit as a promise that He would return for us. And that the Holy Spirit would work in our lives to make us holy in preparation for Christ's return. He knew that Christ would return to heaven to prepare a place for us. He knew that once it was ready, He, the Heavenly Father, in the fullness of time, would give approval for Christ's return to claim us as His Bride.

God created marriage. It is His to define. He knows how it works best. Now, let's return to the verse at hand.

³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

Some would argue that this idea of the husband's headship was cultural and only applied to Christian marriages back then. That would be the easier response, especially in today's culture, but as Christians we must look at the full counsel of scripture and through honest study trust the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth on this issue (John 16:13).

The main problem with saying that this verse only applies to the Corinthian's culture is that the biblical reasoning is not cultural. As we have already discussed in the previous paragraphs, marriage was created by God to explain to us Christ's relationship with His bride, the church. This purpose is still in effect. Christ is still the head of the church and we, the church, are still waiting for Christ's return, when He will take us as His bride.

God has established different forms of authority in our world. God established governments to enforce justice and to provide protection in a society. God established pastors and elders to lead and shepherd churches. God established husbands to lead, love, protect and nurture their wives. God established parents to raise and direct their children. In each case God-honoring leadership and submission, working together, are needed for life to flourish in those situations.

The word "submission" has taken on a negative meaning in our day. We see it as inferior and weak. We see it as forsaking our rights and letting another rule over us as they please, but that is not what the Apostle Paul is referring to in this verse.

Please note that Christ submitted to the Father. Christ was not weak or inferior in any way. He submitted to God the Father as an equal. He was God and yet understood the importance of submission. We are called to do the same.

Philippians 2:5-11 says it like this:

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Christ submitted first. Now He is calling Husbands to submit to Him as their Head and be the men and the husbands that He requires. That we would not be husbands who are lazy, selfish, angry, lustful, bossy, irritable, greedy and prideful. But instead, as we submit to Christ daily, we would be servants. We would be kind, patient, loving, hardworking, generous, gentle, pure, humble and quick to apologize and make right a wrong. Yes, that we would lead, but not out of brute strength, but instead out of wisdom and godliness. For this to happen husbands must submit to Christ as their Head.

In regard to wives and submission, Ephesians 5:22-25 says this:

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Husbands are to submit to Christ and love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. Wives are to submit to the love and the leadership of their husbands. In so doing, both will glorify God and reap the blessing of a healthy marriage and a healthy home that honors God.

Whether man or woman, married or single, the Christian life starts with submission to Christ and is followed by submission to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21). In the life of a church there should always be a sense of submission, one to another.

Please understand that this is God's ideal plan and will for married couples. Will there be some homes where the men refuse their role of leading? Yes. Will there be some homes led by single parents where the one parent has to be the head? Yes. Will there be some homes where only one spouse is a believer and they have to prayerfully figure out how to live out their part of God's calling in their marriage, even though the other spouse does not share God's perspective? Yes. Will there be days that we war with our own selfishness and pride and fail to obey God's will for us in our marriage? Yes. But the first step is to know His good and perfect will. The second step is to surrender to God until He makes it a reality in our lives. Paul now continues with the practical application of this point.

⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵ but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶ For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head.

To some extent head coverings were worn in the church and in the larger culture in Corinth. We do not know the full story, but from historical documents we can begin to understand what was happening.

Philo of Alexandria (20 BC to AD 50) in his writings known as *The Special Laws* records the procedure followed by priests who examined women accused of adultery. He wrote how, *"The priest shall take the barley and offer it to the woman, and shall take away from her the head-dress on her head, that she may be judged with her head bare, and deprived of the symbol of modesty, which all those women are accustomed to wear who are completely blameless."*

From this writing we see that the head covering was a symbol of modesty for a woman.

Tertullian, around AD 200, wrote of some of the earliest churches whose custom was for the married women and virgins of age to wear a veil or head covering. He testified that the Corinthian church still

continued this norm at that time. [Tertullian, *The Veiling of Virgins*, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 4 pp. 27-29,33]

Hippolytus, a leader of the church in Rome, also lived around 200 AD. He recorded practices and customs from the early church. In his writing, *Apostolic Tradition* he made this statement: *“And let all the women have their heads covered with an opaque cloth, not with a veil of thin linen, for this is not a true covering.”*

The traditional, conservative, wearing of head coverings was the norm in the Corinthian church. It was a sign of modesty, purity and belonging. It symbolized being under the headship, the cover, care and protection of one’s husband or in the case of a virgin, one’s father.

Based on Paul’s writings, it appears that some women in the church in Corinth were no longer wearing their head coverings. It might have been that these women were affected by the feminist movements in the Roman Empire during this time in History. Others might have come out of pagan worship where the women worshipped without covering their heads. It might be that they were flaunting their freedom in Christ and just did not want to wear the head covering.

In itself, it was not a sin to not wear a piece of material on your head, but in the given context it was a distraction and a stumbling block to others. In their context, to not wear the traditional head covering was to make a statement. The woman was refusing to acknowledge her belonging to her husband and her submission to Christ. Her actions were not taking into consideration the orderly worship of the congregation. In some cases, her lack of head covering might even be communicating to others a spirit of rebellion and sexual immorality.

Now imagine a woman praying or prophesying dressed in a manner that communicates a defiant, self-serving, immoral attitude. That is what was happening in the Corinthian church. Paul, with what seems to be slight exaggeration, suggests that if you are going to make that kind of statement and show that kind of disregard for others, you might as well cut your hair short or even shave your head, actions that would clearly bring shame and disrepute to a woman in their day.

Like the meat that was offered to idols, nothing in the wearing or not wearing of the head covering was in itself right or wrong. In these verses Paul is talking about women and their head coverings, but the larger principles here are for us all. We all are to deny our own rights for the good of others, and we each should strive to protect the orderliness of worship within our congregation.

So, do the women of our church need to wear head coverings? No. You can if you would like, but it is not necessary. The cultural norms no longer demand the use of a head covering. Remember that the wearing of something on their heads was not in itself right or wrong. It was only the message that it contained in that cultural context that made wearing a head covering necessary. We can now set this specific behavior of “wearing a head covering” aside while still clinging to the principle that it was based upon.

Is it still necessary to deny our own rights when it is best for those around us? Yes. As followers of Christ we are called to deny ourselves, if it will better glorify God, love our neighbor and point others towards Christ. May we remember daily what God has done for us, and from that abundance may we submit, give, serve, yield and love others around us until Christ returns.

Does the husband still have to submit to Christ as His head? Is the husband still the head of the wife? Does the husband still have to take responsibility and leadership in the marriage? Does the wife still need to submit to the headship of the husband? Yes. God put this order in place so that we would see a living example of Christ and the church. This is God's ideal for marriage, but it is only by the grace of God that the husband will ever be a worthy head and the wife will ever live graciously in submission between equals.

My prayer today for us husbands, regardless of your culture or your family background, is that God's Word and His Spirit have landed heavily on our hearts in regards to our responsibility to submit to Christ and to lead our families well. That we would receive conviction of sin graciously from the Holy Spirit. That we would die to self and cry out to God to transform our lives and make us the husbands and fathers that we are called to be. That we would become men who are worthy of following. That we could join with Paul in saying, *"Be imitators of me as I am of Christ."* Let me encourage you to take two first steps. Pray and seek a mentor, a man who you believe God can use to show you how to be the kind of husband you need to be.

My prayer today for you wives is that God will grant you a confidence in Christ. That Christ will be your assurance so that you will be able to honor Christ and glorify Him as you submit to the headship of your husband. For some of you this idea of needing to submit to your husband as head sounds so unwise. If that is the case, let me encourage you to start by praying for him. Encourage him. Cheer for him. Be his help-mate as God has created you to be. None of us can do this alone, but as husbands pray for wives, and wives pray for husbands, and as husbands pray with wives, we put this whole process in God's hands and trust Him to work miracles in our marriages.

Don't wait for your mate to be perfect before you do your part. May we all humble ourselves today and submit to Christ. In Him we will find everything that we need.

Discussion questions:

- 1) What from this sermon did you find most meaningful?
- 2) Why do you think our culture desires the new and trendy more than the ancient truths of scripture?
- 3) How can we show the relevance of God's Word in today's world?
- 4) How would you rephrase "the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" in your own words?

- 5) Why do we often have trouble with the idea of submission?
- 6) In your own words explain why women wearing a head covering is no longer necessary and that the husband being the head of his wife still is?
- 7) What from these verses do you think God wants you to remember and apply this week?