

How Should Christians Respond to Paul

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Christians have diverse opinions regarding what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:1-15. For example, Paul could have been writing that it is a sin for men to wear long hair like women and women to wear short hair like men. Paul's counsel to the church at Corinth was based on Old Testament principles that superficial students of the Bible do not understand or appreciate. For this reason, Christians frequently distort Paul's writings and arrive at conclusions that Paul did not intend. The apostle Peter also noticed this problem:

"Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. -" (2 Peter 3:15,16)

To better understand Paul's epistle to the church at Corinth, we first have to understand what Paul was thinking. Please consider Paul's thoughts on the imminent return of Jesus and how he thought this should affect marriage:

"Because of the present crisis [the imminent return of Jesus], I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.

But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this [so stay as you are]. What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should [abstain from sex and] live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away [anytime now]." (1 Corinthians 7:28-31, insertions and italics mine)

Even though Paul recommended "remain as you are," Paul also understood human nature. He also wrote:

"I wish that all men were [as unaffected by sexual attraction] as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." (1 Corinthians 7:7-9, insertion and italics mine)

Paul had a view of life that was affected by his belief that the end of the world was imminent – in fact, he clearly wrote, **"time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if**

they had none." He counseled that men and women should abstain from sexual relations because Jesus would appear soon. Paul evidently reasoned the idea that sexual relations should cease before the appearing of the Lord from a parallel of Moses' command to Israel at Mt. Sinai:

"After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. Then he said to the people, 'Prepare yourselves for the third day. *Abstain from sexual relations.*' On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain." (Exodus 19:14-17, italics mine)

Paul's View on Authority

Paul was the son of a Pharisee. No doubt, he became a Pharisee because he loved to study law. He was fascinated by the results that occur in people when they heed divine law. After his conversion, Paul spent three studious years in isolation. (Galatians 1:18) He went to "Desert University" to rethink and restudy his understanding of God and his world view.

When Paul was alone in the desert with portions of the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit enlightened Paul and he learned how and why God *legitimately* rejected the nation of Israel as trustees of His gospel. Paul also discovered that God's next step in the plan of redemption was the Christian movement (Ephesians 3:1-11) and Paul discovered that everyone who believes in Christ is considered (by God) to be an heir of Abraham. (Galatians 3:28,29)

Because very few of the early Christians were well educated, not many of them could follow Paul's logic. Few people understood *why* Paul said what he said and this gulf of ignorance led to enormous confusion (and it still does). Various church elders attempted to build arguments using Paul's writings without first understanding the basis for Paul's argument and consequently, more chaos ensued. This is why Peter made the remark that some Christians were distorting Paul's writings "to their own destruction."

Some of Paul's statements appear to be very strange when viewed 2,000 years after he wrote them. Paul's counsel on hair length fits into this category. Consider this passage and notice the basis for his argument:

"Does not *the very nature of things* teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering." (1 Corinthians 11:14,15, italics mine)

From Paul's perspective, "the very nature of things" referred to the fact that a man with long hair looked like a woman and a woman with short hair looked like a man. What does hair length have to do with "the very nature of things"? Look at this passage:

"A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your

God detests anyone who does this." (Deuteronomy 22:5)

God insists that women and men look different? The simple answer is "authority." Why do generals dress differently than colonels who dress differently from sergeants who dress differently from privates? In a word, "authority." Our dress speaks about our authority; this is why privates do not look like generals and presidents do not look like homeless wanderers. Follow Paul's words to understand the role he believed authority has in life:

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves." (Romans 13:1,2)

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear. . . ." (Ephesians 6:1,5)

"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. *For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.* Now as the church submits [obeys] **to Christ, so also wives should submit [obey] to their husbands in everything.**" (Ephesians 5:22-24, insertions and italics mine)

Paul viewed life as a hierarchy of authority and Paul clearly put women below men in terms of authority.

"To the woman he [God] **said, 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.'**" (Genesis 3:16)

It is God's plan that each husband "should wear the pants" and be the spiritual leader of his household. It is God's plan that a man should love his wife (as Christ loved His church and gave His life for it) and that each wife should obey her husband as she obeys the Lord. It was God's plan that husbands train up their children properly. In fact, the Lord chose Abraham so that he would train up his children to do right and refuse wrong:

"For I have chosen him [Abraham], **so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.**" (Genesis 18:19, insertion mine)

Paul saw the happiness and beneficial order which divine law and love could achieve in the home, the church, and the nation if divine order was implemented, and many of Paul's arguments are consistently based on this world view. Look at his counsel regarding the choice of church leaders:

"An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless – not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to

drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined." (Titus 1:6-8)

Now that we have reviewed a few concepts about Paul's interest and devotion to law and order (the very nature of things), consider these words from Paul:

"Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head – it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. - **For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.**" (1 Corinthians 11:4-10)

Three elements stand out in this passage. First, if a man prays with his head covered, he dishonors his head because man was created in the image and glory of God. However, if a woman prays with her head uncovered, she dishonors her head because she is under the authority of her husband or father. Women should not mimic men for they were created for men.

Second, men did not come from women and men were not created for women. Paul says this puts women in a lower position. Therefore, **"the woman ought to have a sign of authority upon her head."** Third, if this passage was everything that Paul said about the hierarchy of authority between men and women, every woman would have two good reasons to be angry with Paul. Please keep reading!

"In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. *Judge for yourselves:* Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

Does not the very nature of things [the natural order established by God] **teach you that if a man has long hair** [so that he looks like a woman], **it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice** [I have nothing further to say than an appeal for natural order] – **nor do the [other] churches of God** [located around the region]. " (1 Corinthians 11:11-16, insertions and italics mine)

Summary

The hierarchy advocated by Paul is biblical, reasonable, and understandable, but limited to Paul's application. God has made two timeless declarations: Husbands have higher authority (Genesis 3:16) and there should be no confusion between the sexes (Deuteronomy 22:5). Contrary to what some people say, Paul does not define the will of God on hair length and head

covering. Instead, Paul borrows two declarations from God to support a position on hair length and head covering.

Cross dressing is unacceptable in God's sight because it causes sexual confusion. Sexual confusion is wrong because it dilutes or redirects authority. High priests did not dress like other priests because they had higher authority, and women should not look like men because men have also been given higher authority.

Paul was an advocate of hierarchy because divine order (happiness) stems from divine authority (love). A Christian shows respect for divine authority by obeying Jesus' statement, "**If you love me, you will obey what I command.**" (John 14:15) Obedience that springs from love is joyful, enabling, and ennobling. Coerced obedience always produces rebellion and apostasy.

God has not declared that a woman should cover her head when praying. Paul argued for the idea because he viewed it as a sign of submission (woman's lower standing). *God has not declared that a man should wear short hair or a woman must wear long hair.* Paul argued for the idea because he viewed it as "the natural order of things."

Of course, views about natural order can change over time. Cultures come and go. However, there is nothing wrong with a woman wearing short hair or a man wearing long hair as long as a clear distinction remains between men and women.

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