

On Head Coverings

by John Calvin

John Calvin's sermon emphasizes the importance of decorum and the divine order of authority in the Church, particularly regarding head coverings for women and the roles of men and women in worship.

Scripture: Genesis 2:18, Genesis 26:6, Leviticus 18:6, Numbers 5:15, Isaiah 4:1, 1 Corinthians 6:12, 1 Corinthians 7:25, 1 Corinthians 11:2, 1 Corinthians 11:21, 1 Corinthians 14:40, Galatians 3:28

Topics: "Church Order", "Ecclesiastical Discipline"

Description

John Calvin preaches about the importance of maintaining decorum and order in sacred assemblies, emphasizing the significance of following traditions and practices that are rooted in Scripture and promote reverence and piety. He highlights the distinction between human traditions and divine ordinances, urging believers to adhere to established church customs with a free conscience and a spirit of obedience, while avoiding superstition and neglect. Calvin addresses the balance between freedom and bondage in church constitutions, advocating for the preservation of peace and mutual love through established practices that promote order and unity, even if they are not essential to salvation. He warns against contentiousness and the dangers of disregarding established customs without just cause, emphasizing the need for love to guide decisions in matters of ecclesiastical discipline.

Transcript

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. 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 want of it. Much, therefore, depends upon decorum (to prepon,) 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 honourably and becomingly? Hence he prescribes some things that are connected with public order, by which sacred assemblies are rendered honourable. 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 future be docile.

It is surprising, however, that, while he now bestows upon them this commendation, he had previously blamed them for many things. Nay more, if we consider the state of the Church, such as has been previously described, they were far from deserving this praise. I answer, 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 nothing of 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 *paradosein*; (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. Under this second department they include not merely certain foolish superstitions, and puerile ceremonies, with which they are stuffed, but also all kinds of gross abomination, directly contrary to the plain word of God, and 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 fine, 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, upon this little word, with the view of making Paul the author of all those abominations, which we set aside by plain declaration of Scripture.

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 seemly 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? What has it to do with a worse than Jewish superstition? What has it to do with a tyranny worthy of Phalaris, 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, 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.

3. 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 in question, Paul had given no enactment respecting it. The error of the Corinthians was the occasion of his showing, what part it was becoming to act in this matter. With the view of proving, that it is an unseemly 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 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 of 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. 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.

4. 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 so? 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 he 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 ere long, is all 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, for Paul is not arguing here as to every kind of prayer, but as to solemn prayer in public. Let us, however, bear in mind, that in this matter the error is merely in so far 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 upon 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 fine, the one rule to be observed here is to prepon-- decorum. If that is secured, Paul requires nothing farther.

5. 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. (1 Timothy 2:12.) It would not, therefore, be allowable for them to prophesy even with a covering upon their head, and hence it follows that it is to no purpose that he argues here as to a covering. 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 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 unseemly for women to have their heads bare. Nature itself, says he, 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. 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 unseemliness, rather than for what is an incentive to lust.

7. The man ought not to cover his head, because he is the image. 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, 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 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 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. 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, 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. From that authority he draws an argument 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, 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, or any other kind of covering. ["C'est la couerture de teste, soit un chapperon, ou couurechef, ou coiffe, ou chose semblable;"]--"It is a covering of the head, whether it be a hood, or a kerchief, or a coif, or anything of that kind."]

It is asked, whether he speaks of married women exclusively, for there are some that restrict to them 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 one whit more seemly for a woman to have her head uncovered than to be shaven -- this being applicable to virgins also.

Because of the angels. This passage is explained in various ways. As the Prophet Malachi 2:7 calls priests angels of God, some are of opinion that Paul speaks of them; but the ministers of the word have nowhere that term applied to them by itself -- that is, without something being added; and the meaning would be too forced. I understand it, therefore, in its proper signification. But it is asked, why it is that he would have women 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, 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. 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 their impudence in the view of the angels of heaven.

11. But neither is the man without the woman. This is added partly as a check upon men, that they may not insult over women; and partly as a consolation to women, that they may not feel dissatisfied with being under subjection. "The male sex (says he) has a distinction over the female sex, with this understanding, that they ought to be connected together by mutual benevolence, for the one cannot do without the other. If they be 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."

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 sex, and do not consider that they are under obligations to it by the appointment and decree of God. The pious, on the other hand, acknowledge that the male sex is but the half of the human race. They ponder the meaning of that statement -- God created man: male and female created he them. (Genesis 1:27, and Genesis 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. 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." 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. As the woman is of the 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 for man. This decree of God exhorts us to cultivate mutual intercourse.

But all things of 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 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 of them throw off the yoke of God, who has not without good reason appointed this distinction of ranks. Farther, when it is said that the man and the woman, when they are wanting 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.

Doth not even nature itself. 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. 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 apply to them the common epithet of unshorn. It was not until a late period that barbers began to be employed at Rome -- about the time of Africanus the elder. 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 or in Germany. Nay more, it would have been reckoned an unseemly thing for men, no less than for women, to be shorn or shaven; but as in Greece it was reckoned all unbecoming 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. [1 appelle Nature ceste coustume desia confermee par vn long temps et vsage commun;--"He gives the appellation of Nature to this custom, already confirmed by length of time and common use."]

16. But if any man seem. A contentious person is one whose humor inclines him to stir up disputes, and does not care what becomes of 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 (akoinwnhtoi) 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 that 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.--Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

Other Related Passages from John Calvin.

He has not scrupled to give directions as to women's having' the head covered, and other things of that nature.--Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:29.

16. He is to thee a covering of the eyes. Because there is, in these words, some obscurity, the passage is variously explained. The beginning of the verse is free from difficulty. For when Abimelech had given a thousand pieces of silver; in order that his liberality might not be suspected, he declared that he had given them to Abraham; and that since Abraham had been honorably received, his wife was not to be regarded as a harlot. But what follows is more obscure, 'He shall be a veil to thee.' Many interpreters refer this to the gift; in which they seem to me to be wrong. The Hebrews, having no neuter gender, use the feminine instead of it. But Moses, in this place, rather points to the husband; and this best suits the sense. For Sarah is taught that the husband to whom she is joined was as a veil, with which she ought to be covered lest she should be exposed to others. Paul says, that the veil which the woman carries on her head, is the symbol of subjection. (1 Corinthians 11:10.) This also belongs to unmarried persons, as referring to the end for which the sex is ordained; but it applies more aptly to married women; because they are veiled, as by the very ordinance of marriage. I therefore thus explain the words, 'Thou, if thou hadst no husband, wouldst be exposed to many dangers; but now, since God has appointed for thee a guardian of thy modesty, it behoves thee to conceal thyself under that veil. Why then hast thou of thine own accords thrown off this covering?' This was a just censure; because Sarah, pretending that she was in the power of her husband, had deprived herself of the divine protection.--Commentary on Genesis 20:16.

Moses also says that she took a veil: which was a token of shame and modesty. For hence also, the Latin word which signifies "to marry," is derived, because it was the custom to give brides veiled to their husbands. That the same rite was also observed by the fathers, I have no doubt. So much the more shameful, and the less capable of excuse, is the licentiousness of our own age; in which the apparel of brides seems to be purposely contrived for the subversion of all modesty.--Commentary on Genesis 24:64.

When it is said that Potiphar's wife "cast her eyes upon Joseph," the Holy Spirit, by this form of speech, admonishes all women, that if they have chastity in their heart, they must guard it by modesty of demeanor. For, on this account also, they bear a veil upon their heads, that they may restrain themselves from every sinful allurements: not that it is wrong for a woman to look at men; but Moses here describes an impure and dissolute look.--Commentary on Genesis 39:7.

That the woman may be more afraid of perjuring herself, she is presented before God, with her head uncovered too, as if the priest would drag her from her lurking-place; for it seems incongruous that, as some suppose, the veil was removed from her head in token of her infamy, since thus she would have been condemned before her case was heard. She is, then, brought before God's face with her head bare, that she may be seriously alarmed; and then follows the mode of absolution or condemnation.--Commentary on Numbers 5:15.

Paul, on a very trifling point, sets before our eyes the law of nature; for, when he teaches that it is shameful and indecorous for women to appear in public without veils, he desires them to consider, whether it would be decent for them to present themselves publicly with their heads shorn; and finally adds, that nature itself does not permit it. (1 Corinthians 11:14.) Wherefore, I do not see, that, under the pretext of its being a political Law, the purity of nature is to be abolished, from whence arises the distinction between the statutes of God, and the abuses of the Gentiles.--Commentary on Leviticus 18:6.

Let thy name be called on us. It may be rendered, Let us be called by thy name; for when a woman passes into the family of her husband, she is called by his name, and loses her own, because the husband is her head. (1 Corinthians 11:3.) Hence the veil is a token of subjection, and Abimelech said to Sarah, Thy husband Abraham shall be a covering to thy head. (Genesis 20:16.) But if she remain unmarried, she is concealed under the name of her family. That this is the true meaning of that mode of expression is sufficiently evident from what Jacob says when blessing his grandchildren, Let my name, and the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, be called on them; (Genesis 48:16;) that is, "Let them be reckoned as our descendants, and let them be partakers of the covenant, and never excluded from it, as were Esau and Ishmael." In the same manner also do heathen writers speak; as, in Lucan, Marcia, wishing to return to Cato, says: "Grant me only the bare name of marriage; let permission be given that it may be inscribed on my tomb, Marcia the wife of Cato."--Commentary on Isaiah 4:1.

Concerning the first point, here Isaac is reproved, of his inconsideration and folly. For that as much as was in him, he laid his wife open to be defiled. And why so? We have seen before that the husband ought to be as a veil or coverture to his wife. When a woman shall be married, and that her husband shall live with her doing his duty, this is to the end, she may be there as it were in safeguard, and that none come to deceive nor defile her. Now therefore Isaac, for the discharging of his duty, ought to have been as a veil or coverture to his wife: that is to say, under the name of a husband and of marriage: he ought to have let that none should have attempted to withdraw her, whether it were to have her to wife, or after any other manner: For marriage is as a safeguard, (as we have said) and God would have it honored in all ages. And although adulterers would abandon it, as Swine and Asses: yet notwithstanding they have always had remorse in it: and evermore even amongst the Pagans [pagans, heathen], adulterers went not unpunished. It is known that if ever anything in this world was privileged, it was marriage: yea, and thefts and other crimes ought a great deal rather to be borne with, than such enormities: to wit, when the covenant and company which God hath dedicated in his name, to the end it should be holy, as it were separated from profanation, is violated.--Sermons on Election and Reprobation, Seventh sermon, on Genesis 26:6-10.

The term napkin may mean either a handkerchief employed to wipe the face, or it may mean a shawl, but never means a large piece of linen in which the whole body may be wrapped.--An Admonition from an Inventory of Relics.

29. TRUE DECORUM IN WORSHIP, NOT THEATRICAL SHOW

As a consequence, we shall not say that decorum exists where there is nothing but vain pleasure. We see such an example in the theatrical props that the papists use in their sacred rites, where nothing appears but the mask of useless elegance and fruitless extravagance. But decorum for us will be something so fitted to the reverence of the sacred mysteries that it may be a suitable exercise for devotion, or at least will serve as an appropriate adornment of the act. And this should not be fruitless but should indicate to believers with how great modesty, piety, and reverence they ought to treat sacred things. Now, ceremonies, to be exercises of piety, ought to lead us straight to Christ.

Similarly, we shall not establish an order in those trifling pomps which have nothing but fleeting splendor, but in that arrangement which takes away all confusion, barbarity, obstinacy, turbulence, and dissension.

There are examples of the first sort in Paul: that profane drinking bouts should not be mingled with the Sacred Supper of the Lord [1 Corinthians 11:21-22], and that women should not go out in public with uncovered heads [1 Corinthians 11:5]. And we have many others in daily use, such as: that we pray with knees bent and head bare; that we administer the Lord's sacraments not negligently, but with some dignity; that in burying the dead we use some decency; and other practices that belong to the same class.

Of the other kind are the hours set for public prayers, sermons, and sacraments. At sermons there are quiet and silence, appointed places, the singing together of hymns, fixed days for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the fact that Paul forbids women to teach in the church [1 Corinthians 14:34], and the like. Especially are there those things which maintain discipline, such as catechizing, church censures, excommunication, fasting, and whatever can be referred to the same list.

Thus all ecclesiastical constitutions which we accept as holy and salutary should be reckoned under two heads: the first type pertains to rites and ceremonies; the second, to discipline and peace.

30. BONDAGE AND FREEDOM OF CHURCH CONSTITUTIONS

But there is danger here lest, on the one hand, false bishops seize from this the pretext to excuse their impious and tyrannous laws, and on the other, lest some be overscrupulous and, warned of the above evils, leave no place whatever for holy laws. Consequently, it behooves me to declare that I approve only those human constitutions which are founded upon God's authority, drawn from Scripture, and, therefore, wholly divine.

Let us take, for example, kneeling when solemn prayers are being said. The question is whether it is a human tradition, which any man may lawfully repudiate or neglect. I say that it is human, as it is also divine. It is of God in so far as it is a part of that decorum whose care and observance the apostle has commended to us [1 Corinthians 14:40]. But it is of men in so far as it specifically designates what had in general been suggested rather than explicitly stated.

By this one example we may judge what opinion we should have of this whole class. I mean that the Lord has in his sacred oracles faithfully embraced and clearly expressed both the whole sum of true righteousness, and all aspects of the worship of his majesty, and whatever was necessary to salvation;

therefore, in these the Master alone is to be heard. But because he did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these. Lastly, because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.

31. BONDAGE AND FREEDOM OVER AGAINST CHURCH CONSTITUTIONS

Now it is the duty of Christian people to keep the ordinances that have been established according to this rule with a free conscience, indeed, without superstition, yet with a pious and ready inclination to obey; not to despise them, not to pass over them in careless negligence. So far ought we to be from openly violating them through pride and obstinacy!

What sort of freedom of conscience could there be in such excessive attentiveness and caution? Indeed, it will be very clear when we consider that these are no fixed and permanent sanctions by which we are bound, but outward rudiments for human weakness. Although not all of us need them, we all use them, for we are mutually bound, one to another, to nourish mutual love. This may be recognized in the examples set forth above. What? Does religion consist in a woman's shawl, so that it is unlawful for her to go out with a bare head? Is that decree of Paul's concerning silence so holy that it cannot be broken without great offense? Is there in bending the knee or in burying a corpse any holy rite that cannot be neglected without offense? Not at all. For if a woman needs such haste to help a neighbor that she cannot stop to cover her head, she does not offend if she runs to her with head uncovered. And there is a place where it is no less proper for her to speak than elsewhere to remain silent. Also, nothing prohibits a man who cannot bend his knees because of disease from standing to pray. Finally, it is better to bury a dead man in due time than, where a shroud is lacking, or where there are no pallbearers to carry him, to wait until the unburied corpse decays. Nevertheless, the established custom of the region, or humanity itself and the rule of modesty, dictate what is to be done or avoided in these matters. In them a man commits no crime if out of imprudence or forgetfulness he departs from them; but if out of contempt, this willfulness is to be disapproved. Similarly, the days themselves, the hours, the structure of the places of worship, what psalms are to be sung on what day, are matters of no importance. But it is convenient to have definite days and stated hours, and a place suitable to receive all, if there is any concern for the preservation of peace. For confusion in such details would become the seed of great contentions if every man were allowed, as he pleased, to change matters affecting public order! For it will never happen that the same thing will please all if matters are regarded as indifferent and left to individual choice. But if anyone loudly complains and wishes here to be wiser than he ought, let him see with what reason he can defend his over-scrupulousness before the Lord. This saying of Paul's ought to satisfy us: that it is not our custom to contend, or that of the churches of God [1 Corinthians 11:16].--Institutes, !V.10.29-31.

It is probable, that the Corinthians even up to that time retained much of their former licentiousness, and had still a savor of the morals of their city. Now when vices stalk abroad with impunity, custom is regarded as law, and then afterwards vain pretexts are sought for by way of excuse; an instance of which we have in their resorting to the pretext of Christian liberty, so as to make almost everything allowable for

themselves to do. They reveled in excess of luxury. With this there was, as usual, much pride mixed up. As it was an outward thing, they did not think that there was any sin involved in it: nay more, it appears from Paul's words that they abused liberty so much as to extend it even to fornication.--Commentary on 1 Corinthians 6:12.

For he declares that he does not speak simply as a man, but as a faithful teacher of the Church, and an Apostle of Christ. According to his custom, he declares himself to be indebted for this to the mercy of God, as it was no common honor, nay superior to all human merits. Hence it appears, that whatever things have been introduced into the Church by human authority, have nothing in common with this advice of Paul.--Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:25.

21. For every one of you taketh before others his own supper. It is truly wonderful, and next to a miracle, that Satan could have accomplished so much in so short a time. We are, however, admonished by this instance, how much antiquity, without reason on its side, can effect, or, in other words, how much influence a long continued custom has, while not sanctioned by a single declaration of the word of God. This, having become customary, was looked upon as lawful. Paul was then at hand to interfere. What then must have been the state of matters after the death of the Apostles?--Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:21.

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