

I Corinthians 11

Paul dedicates four chapters (I Cor. 11-14) to issues that have arisen within the community, and in particular the question of worship. The whole discussion is prefaced by a word of commendation (11:2) that the Corinthians maintain the traditions handed down by him. Such traditions include the teaching of Jesus on the Lord's Supper, set out in this letter in response to the social divisions between elite and lower-class members of the congregation that have led to disunity in their attitude to the common meal (11:17-34). Paul firstly turns attention to another matter related to the community's conduct in worship, namely the attire of those who exercise leadership roles through prayer and prophecy (11:2-16).

Corinthian Women Prophets (11:2-16)

Corinthian women (or at least some) were indulging in what Paul viewed as an unacceptably free form of worship, prompting him to call upon them to cover their heads when they prayed and prophesied. While it is clear from this passage that Paul accepted and endorsed the practice of men *and* women leading in worship (11:4-5), their current practices meant that gender distinctions were being overlooked. His way of dealing with this issue is a highly condensed and, in places, awkwardly presented, argument in which he appeals to scripture (11:7-9), custom (11:13) and even the principles of nature (11:14).

Why would the women have uncovered their heads in worship? The issue may have arisen because the meetings were held in homes, creating a certain degree of ambiguity because a public gathering was held in a private place, and leading some women to regard worship in a house church as a setting that did not require a head-covering. A further possibility is that their conduct was prompted by their appeal to a tradition 'handed over' to them by Paul and, in particular, their interpretation of the baptismal formula 'there is neither male and female' (Gal. 3:28) as a theological warrant for the eradication of gender differences.

1. What kind of Head-Covering?

By raising questions about the women's possible motives, it is necessary to enquire about the nature and significance of the custom of a woman covering her head. This passage in I Corinthians has traditionally been interpreted to mean that Paul is calling upon women to wear veils (NRSV, NEB), although, interestingly, the Greek word for

'veil' (*kalymma*) does not occur in this passage. The reference is to a 'covering' of some kind. Since Corinth at this time was a Roman colony and provincial capital, it is significant that there is ample Roman evidence (both written and material) that both men and women wore the same kind of covering or outer garment (*himation*), which could be drawn forward from behind the neck to cover the crown of the head, or even further over the face. Men usually were not required to draw this outer garment forward on their head, although the Romans did so when offering sacrifices at an altar. Plutarch (*Roman Questions* 266d) notes that the protocol for religious state functions was to pull the garment to the middle of the ear, while there is a first-century statue of the emperor Augustus making a sacrifice with his garment framing his face. It is however more difficult to determine what were the typical customs for women; they probably varied from period to period and in different cultural contexts within the Graeco-Roman world. There is certainly evidence of women covering their heads in a cultic context. A statue of the priestess Polyæna discovered in Pompeii, for example, depicts her with a garment pulled up over her head.

Other evidence indicates that, in public, a married woman frequently covered her head as a sign of modesty and to protect herself from a man's gaze. In an influential article Bruce Winter draws attention to Roman sculptures of married women wearing a head-covering, clothed in a long dress with a large mantle drawn around her which she used to cover the back of her head, with her arm holding the covering in place on the head. In statues of unmarried women the mantle is drawn over their shoulders but not the head. Now Paul in I Cor. 11:6 notes that women who do not wear a head-covering should have their hair cut off as a matter of shame, which, in the light of the classical evidence, may mean that they took upon themselves the unmarried state (Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 64.3 refers to women guilty of adultery having their head shorn). Whether the Corinthian women prophets were also married women is open to debate; the term used by Paul in this passage is *gynē*, which can denote 'wife' (as used in the NRSV in 11:3) but it is also used more generally for a 'woman' (as by the NRSV for the remaining examples in this passage). This makes it difficult to determine whether Paul has in mind the attire of married women or, more generally, to women who, in the context of prayer and prophecy, must wear a head-covering as a symbol of their femaleness.

That the removal of such head-coverings was a sign of freedom from the restrictions of being female and of a new religious status is attested in the Hellenistic Jewish

narrative *Joseph and Aseneth* (either first century BCE or first century CE). This text describes the conversion of the virgin Aseneth; she is ordered by an angel to remove her clothes of mourning and to put on a radiant garment. When she returns wearing a head-covering, the angel commands her to remove it because 'you are a holy virgin today and your head is as that of a young man' (15:1-2).

The other possibility is that the covering in question is not a mantle but a particular hairstyle (women were urged to pin their hair on top of their heads). This is certainly a plausible interpretation in the light of Paul's statements on hair in this passage. In 11:5-6 he suggests that if a woman does not cover her head, she should cut off her hair. Furthermore, in 11:15 he states explicitly that a woman's long hair is her 'glory' and has been given to her for a 'covering'; this implies that to have the head covered could mean to have the hair tied up on top of the head rather than hanging loose. Certainly, according to Jewish tradition, for a woman to have dishevelled hair in public was viewed as shameful, the first step towards adultery (m. Ketubot 7:6). In Graeco-Roman traditions it was associated with prostitutes, evoking a picture of ritual ecstasy, including the cultic worship of oriental gods such as Isis known to have been prominent in Corinth. These two theories (an actual head-covering or a particular hairstyle), are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is possible that women prophets at Corinth were failing to cover their heads during prayer and prophecy and, by replicating the practices of pagan cults, were loosening their hair as an expression of their freedom in the Spirit (the implication of 12:2 is that many Corinthian believers had formerly been members of such cults). By doing so they were seeking to transcend differences and cross the boundaries of social conventions. Paul may also have feared that the young congregation would be viewed by outsiders as merely another ecstatic cult.

2. Evidence of a Hierarchical Order (11:3)

Paul approaches the question of head-coverings in a very indirect way, by opening with an uncompromising theological statement about an ordained hierarchical order: 'Christ is the head of every man, and the husband (man) is the head of the wife (woman), and God is the head of Christ' (11:3). This theological statement is linked by Paul to the issue of head-coverings through play on the literal and metaphorical meaning of the word 'head' (*kephalē*). The word *kephalē* can possess several meanings, but its metaphorical application by Paul in his argument raises the question whether it here denotes 'ruler', with the idea that a husband has authority over his

wife, or 'source' with the emphasis on the fact that woman was made from the body of man (a theme highlighted by Paul in 11:8 when he declares, 'man was not made from woman, but woman from man'). If the latter meaning is intended, gender difference is confirmed but not female subjection to the male. In other words, temporal priority would be attributed to the creation of the male (cf. Gen. 2:21-23), but it does not necessarily follow that the female is given an inferior position. This interpretation does not, however, take into account the clear expressions of hierarchy in the overall argument in 11:7-9. What Paul states is that the man was created first, the woman was created out of him (cf. Gen. 2:21-23), and that the woman was created for the sake of the man (cf. Gen. 2:18). To reinforce his argument that a woman must cover her head because she is the 'glory' of man, the creation of woman 'out of man' becomes, for Paul, the warrant for the claim about man's pre-eminence over woman. Thus Paul is promoting a hierarchical view of creation in which God is the 'head' of Christ (on the subordination of Christ to God, see 3:23; 15:28) and a woman is created subordinate to man. As a result, her head-covering symbolizes her relation to man within the order of creation.

3. A Matter of Shame (11:4-6)

The interplay of the literal and metaphorical meaning of the word 'head' continues in the next step in the logic of Paul's argument, in which the term covering or uncovering of the head signifies respect or disrespect for one's superior in the hierarchy: the male with a covered head disgraces his head (both physical and, figuratively, Christ as his 'head' or authority). Similarly the female with an uncovered head disgraces her physical head and the man as her 'head'. Since she is inappropriately attired in worship, she brings shame upon her husband (or the men of the congregation). The theme of shame continues in 11:6 where Paul notes that it is disgraceful (lit. 'shame') for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved. It is interesting to note, in this respect, that this verse contains one of only two occurrences of the term 'shame' (*aischros*) in the authentically Pauline letters, the other being 14:35 where the issue of a woman (married?) speaking in church is also described as a matter of shame. This indicates that an important aspect of Paul's argument in this section is the avoidance of shame in the wider Corinthian social context, particularly on those who are their 'heads'.

Paul is drawing in this regard on the terminology characteristic of a patriarchal society in the first-century Mediterranean world, namely a hierarchically structured society

shaped by the values of honour and shame. Cultural anthropological study of the Mediterranean world demonstrates that a group or a family's honour and social acceptability depended on, and was symbolized by, the honour of its 'head' (the *paterfamilias*) and vice versa. By calling on the women to cover their heads, Paul is urging them to abandon a practice that causes shame because it crosses the social boundaries between the sexes and their respective roles (as suggested by the Graeco-Roman evidence for women's head coverings); for the woman to ignore gender difference and the hierarchical chain brings dishonour on the woman and shame on the man.

4. Argument from Scripture (11:7-9)

In 11:7-9 Paul develops a new line of argument by drawing on the Genesis creation accounts to support his critique of the head-covering practices among the Corinthian women: they contradict the man's purpose of bringing glory to God and the woman's purpose of bringing glory to man: 'For a man ought not to have his head covered (NRSV: unveiled), since he is the image and glory (NRSV: reflection) of God; but woman is the glory of man'. He therefore maintains a distinction between man (as the image and glory of God) and woman (as the glory of man) and the logic of his argument seems to be as follows: a man's head should not be covered in worship because it brings glory to God, while a woman's head should be covered since it would otherwise bring glory to man. This is an intriguing reading of the Genesis text, which states clearly that both male and female were created in the image of God (1:27). Furthermore, the LXX version of this verse uses the term *anthrōpos* ('human'), whereas Paul opts for the word *anēr* ('male'). The lack of reference to 'image' in relation to woman may be due to Paul's dependence on current Jewish exegesis of Gen. 1:27 (*Life of Adam and Eve* interprets the verse with reference to Adam, but not to Eve), or it results from Paul's reading of Genesis 1 through the lens of the second creation account, where woman is created after man and out of man. Paul alludes to the latter in the next verse: 'Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man'.

What is also striking is that the motif of 'glory' (man is the image and glory of God) is not found in the text of Genesis 1:27. It may even be argued that Paul is deliberately playing here on the multiple meanings of the term 'glory' (*doxa*), which can denote reflection or glory but also 'honour'. If so, the argument continues the contrast

between honour and shame, in the sense that man owes honour to God while the woman, according to the social order, owes 'honour' or 'glory' to man. Through his interpretation of the creation accounts, Paul therefore introduces the motif of honour/glory in order to define gender identity and roles in accordance with the definition of shame and honour in the Graeco-Roman world.

5. Head-Covering as a 'Symbol of Authority...Because of the Angels' (11:10)

Although the argument so far has made many assumptions (both cultural and theological), perhaps the most difficult verse to interpret is the highly compact statement in 11:10. What does it mean to state that a woman's head-covering is 'a symbol of authority on her head' (literally: 'a woman ought to have authority on her head') and this 'because of the angels'? Traditionally this verse has been taken to mean 'a symbol of authority over her', in the sense that the head-covering is a sign of men's authority over women. The NRSV rendering, however, correctly reflects the fact that the Greek text at this point does not read 'over her', but simply states that a woman must wear an authority *on* her head. What does it mean for a woman to 'have authority on her head'?

The most likely interpretation is that it denotes the right to 'exercise authority' and that the head-covering is a symbol of a woman's own authority to pray and prophesy in Christian worship. In the light of the argument presented by Paul so far, the reasoning would then be as follows: if woman is the glory of man (11:7) her head-covering is intended to hide *man's* glory in the presence of God. The logic (although not stated) is that for a woman to pray with her head uncovered would be to reflect the glory of man rather than God; this glory must be hidden, so that in prayer and prophecy she only gives glory to God. In the case of the man, he is not expected to cover his head because his head is the image or reflection of the glory of God and that glory is to be allowed to shine forth.

Whatever one thinks of the validity of Paul's reasoning at this point, undergirded by an argument based on a hierarchical chain, what he is not claiming is that the head-covering was intended as a symbol of a woman's subjection to man. It rather gives her the authority to have an active role in worship, by praying and prophesying in direct dependence on the Spirit.

Why is the head-covering a woman's symbol of authority 'because of the angels'? This obscure phrase is sometimes read as a reference to the danger that angels might be sexually attracted because of the sight of women with uncovered heads. Genesis 6:1-4 describes the forbidden union between the daughters of men and the angels, the 'sons of God', as the cause of the Flood, a narrative taken up by a later Jewish text as follows: 'Command your wives and daughters, that they adorn not their heads and faces to deceive the mind....for thus they allured the Watchers who were before the Flood' (*Testament of Reuben* 5:6). However, echoes of this legend are far from evident in Paul's statements and, more importantly, it bears no relation to the central issue of this passage, which is Christian worship. It more probably alludes to the Jewish understanding of the role of angels as guardians of the created order (see *I Enoch* 60:12, 16-21; 61:10; *Jubilees* 2:2-3) and as present with the community to ensure order in worship. An illuminating Qumran parallel notes the concern to preserve the holiness of the assembly because the angels participate in it or watch over the assembly (1QSa 2:3-11: 'the Angels of Holiness are [with] their [congregation]'; cf. LXX Ps. 137:1 where David sings praises to God 'in the presence of angels' and God's people). This would mean that the women are called upon to behave in a proper fashion because of the presence of angelic beings in their midst.

6. Mutual Dependence 'in the Lord' (11:11-12)

In 11:11-12 Paul seems to moderate his argument by developing it in a different direction (note: 'nevertheless' for *plēn*). Instead of the contrasts that have characterized his argument so far, Paul now draws comparison in order to affirm the mutual interdependence of women and men 'in the Lord', that is, in the new eschatological community: 'Nevertheless, in the Lord, woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman' (literally, 'there is no woman without man and no man without woman'). To explain this new relationship of man and woman 'in the Lord', Paul provides an analogy from the created order by drawing on the second creation account ('just as woman came from man'; cf. 11:8), followed by a reference to the human life cycle through childbirth ('so man comes through woman') to demonstrate that man and woman are mutually dependent (12:12a). Thus, while gender distinctions are not eradicated (from/through), there is mutuality 'in the Lord' and unity in that 'all things come from God' (12:12b).

7. Appeal to Custom and 'Nature' (11:13-16)

Towards the end of the passage Paul returns to the issue of social and cultural norms by asking whether it is proper (*prepon*) for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered. The word *prepon* is frequently used in first-century Graeco-Roman sources to express conformity to social values and customs. Furthermore 'nature' teaches that long hair is degrading for a man but glorious for a woman; thus even nature was thought to teach a distinction between male and female hairstyles. Cf. Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.16.9-14): 'Let us leave the chief works of nature..... and consider merely what she does in passing. Can anything be more useless than hairs on a chin? Well, what then? Has not nature used even these in a most suitable way possible? Has she not by these means distinguished between the male and the female? Does not the nature of each one among us cry aloud forthwith from afar, "I am a man; on this understanding approach me, on this understanding talk with me, ask nothing further, behold the signs?" Again, in the case of women, just as nature has mingled in their voice a certain softer note, so likewise she has taken away the hair from their chins...Wherefore, we ought to preserve the signs which God has given; we ought not to throw them away; we ought not, so far as in us lies, to confuse the sexes which have been distinguished in this fashion'.

The question, however, is whether Paul's argument on head-coverings is inconsistent. Earlier in the passage woman's creation from man was used to reinforce her secondary status in the hierarchical chain (11:8). Now the tables seem to be turned as Paul uses the same scriptural proof in conjunction with man's origins through the woman to affirm their mutuality and to give the woman equal status. Hence since neither exists without the other, neither one has priority over the other in terms of their relationship 'in the Lord'. It could be argued that these two readings of the creation account are not irreconcilable with each other (hierarchy is set in a fine balance with mutuality), although there is an undeniable shift in the argument brought about by Paul's direct reflection on the new relationship between man and woman brought about by Christ. It is also a case of Paul seeking to make two contexts stand side by side: the Corinthians' setting within a Graeco-Roman context (with its in-built hierarchy and gender difference in a culture of honour and shame) and their new reality in the context of Christian worship in which both women and men are given the gifts of the Spirit to pray and prophesy (cf. 12:11: the Spirit distributes gifts 'as it chooses').

Are these arguments consistent with Paul's own fundamental theological vision? In terms of his emphasis on the created distinction between man and woman, placed within the larger picture of mutuality, his arguments are consistent with his claim that the community should remain in the condition in which they were called (7:17-24). The issue of gender identity remains valid and he certainly does not call for the rejection of the body that defines gender difference. A believer's new identity in Christ does not erase maleness and femaleness, but he does speak of a humanity without gender discrimination (cf. Gal. 3:28). The strained aspect is that he seems to establish a hierarchy based on this gender. Paul may even realize that his arguments are not likely to persuade and thus resorts finally to an abrupt dismissal of 'contentiousness', refusing to allow further discussion of this matter (11:16).

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