

06. 1 Corinthians 11:2-34



I Corinthians 11:2-6

I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you. But I want you to understand that the Messiah is the head [‘source’; authority is not the issue here] of every man, and man is the head of woman, and God is the head of the Messiah.

Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, and any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled [or ‘hanging down loose’] disgraces her head [copying the mystery cults] — it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil.

When Paul wrote the following words to the Galatians, he was expressing one of his deepest convictions. We can be sure that it expresses one of the traditions that he would have handed on to the Corinthians as well: 'As many of you as were baptised into the Messiah have clothed yourselves with him. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in the Messiah Jesus' (Galatians 3:27-28).

However, it appears that after Paul's departure from Corinth a practice arose which was justified on the basis of the equality of the baptised, but which Paul feels the need to correct.

Paul seems to be objecting to their having their head '**uncovered**' in the sense that they are letting their hair hang loose. To do this in public was considered shameful and so was a barrier to attracting people to join the community

Paul is plainly shocked that they would behave like this in the liturgical assembly. It is possible that Paul may have feared that this behaviour was approaching the kind of behaviour associated with some of the mystery cults, but it seems from his argument that his main problem was that in failing to wear their hair in the expected female way, they were confusing the sexual differences between man and woman, and therefore the natural order ordained by God.

In many ways the light of the gospel caused Paul to see beyond the thought-horizon within which his contemporaries lived. The position of leadership exercised by women in the churches under Paul's direction indicates his openness to their using for the good of the community whatever gifts they had from the Spirit of Jesus. Paul also saw that the differences between the sexes, like other differences, were not of ultimate significance. What ultimately matters is to be 'in the Messiah Jesus' (Galatians 3:28) and to live a life of 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6).

However, the differences between male and female remain, and since, in the culture of the day, the behaviour of the women was causing division, Paul feels the need to correct it.

Presumably those who were praying in this way would have argued for their position on the basis of freedom: ‘all things are lawful’ (6:12 and 10:23). They would also have enthusiastically endorsed Paul’s teaching expressed in Galatians 3:27-28. They may also have argued that it was important to do away with any symbol which reinforced the male dominance prevailing in the Jewish and also in the Greco-Roman societies of the day. The superior physical strength of the male, and the opportunities for leisure and for education which were possible for some men but generally unavailable to women, supported a widespread prejudice that the male was ‘naturally’ more intelligent than the female. Decision-making should be in the hands of the male, while the female should remain in a position of servitude to him.

Girls were married by parental decision to men who had completed their education, had learned a trade and could support a wife and family. This plus the customary age difference meant that a girl who had just become a woman and had no education other than what she received at home, left the protection of her father's home and came under the authority of her husband. Her role in the home was obvious and crucial, but in public she was expected to be, as it were, invisible.

Women would have found belonging to a Christian community a remarkably liberating experience. They were fully part of the assembly and could play a leading role in public prayer and prophecy. Of course we must remember that the assembly took place in a home. However, some, including Paul, are shocked at the way in which some of them are comporting themselves when they pray and prophesy.

Perhaps this may also be giving the church a bad name in the general community. In any case, Paul commands them when they are taking part in the liturgical assembly to continue to wear their hair in an appropriate way as was expected of women in public.

We might have expected Paul to follow the line of argument which he used in regard to the eating of meat. He might have begun with a statement that hair style or the wearing of veils was a matter of no objective consequence. He might then have gone on to ask the women to follow custom so as not to disturb those who were unable to grasp their intentions, and not to cause scandal to those outside the community. His argument, in other words, would have been on the basis not of rights but of love. He might even have reminded them of the imminent coming of judgment, and advised them not to distract themselves by causing disagreements in the community over such relatively unimportant matters. In fact, however, he argues in quite a different way.

He begins by stating something that he sees as not requiring proof: God is the head of the Messiah, who is the head of the male, and the male is the head of the female. In using the word 'head' Paul could be referring to authority. However, since there is no indication in this passage that either authority or obedience is the issue, it seems best to understand 'head' in the sense of 'source'. Jesus receives his life from God; man receives his life from Jesus 'through whom are all things and through whom we exist'(8:6); and, as Paul will demonstrate from Scripture in the following verses, woman receives her life from man. This God-given hierarchy as understood by Paul includes a pre-eminence in dignity and glory, from God to Jesus, from Jesus to man, and from man to woman. To behave in a way that disregards this order is to bring shame upon oneself and upon any community which allows it. Let us now attempt to follow Paul's argument.

1 Corinthians 11:7-10

For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and glory of God; [Genesis 1:27 - referring to 'adam, not 'ish!] but woman is the glory of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man [Genesis 2:22]. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man [Genesis 2:18]. For this reason a woman ought to have control over her head, because of the angels.

It is not these texts that are driving Paul. He is being driven by the kind of cultural conviction that is expressed in statements like the following: 'A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment. Whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord, your God' (Deuteronomy 22:5). For Paul, as for all his contemporaries, the created order, including the superior place of the male, is a given. He is using Scripture, as is his custom, to illustrate and support his point.

The conclusion, then, is that when a woman is moved to pray or to prophesy in the liturgical assembly she should exercise control over her appearance and not wear her hair like the men, uncovered. That Paul's interest is in maintaining the order of creation as willed by God is supported by his reference to the angels. The angels watch over the created order. In a special way they watch over the assembly at prayer: 'I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the angels I sing your praise' (Psalm 138:1). A woman should behave in a way that reflects this order, 'exercising authority over her head' by wearing her hair correctly.

I Corinthians 11:11-12

Paul himself seems to be aware of the danger of taking his argument from order too far, for he insists that ‘**in the Lord**’ man and woman are mutually interdependent.

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God.

Paul argues that, since all things come from God, the order established by God must be respected in all things, including the relationship between the sexes. The distinction between the sexes should not be blurred in the way people dress when praying or prophesying. The way this ordered relationship is to be exercised must also reflect Christian love. But the order itself remains unquestioned. For Paul, being in the Messiah transcends any differences there are between man and woman (Galatians 3:28), but it does not dissolve them.

I Corinthians 11:13-15

Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

As though aware that he is struggling to support his conviction, Paul attempts an argument from 'nature'. The natural order was the principal norm of behaviour in Stoic ethics. Nature gives women plentiful head covering (unlike men who are prone to baldness). Only 'soft' men wear their hair in an effeminate way. If nature covers a woman's head, so runs Paul's 'argument', she should follow nature's example and keep her head covered.

I Corinthians 11:16

Finally, having run out of arguments, Paul appeals to custom.

But if anyone is disposed to be contentious — we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

The gospel is continually uncovering ways in which our horizon of thinking is limited and biased. We should not expect Paul to be able to see all the implications of the gospel free from any unconscious influence from attitudes that prevailed in his day. Our task is to try to find the key insights which inspired his writing, not to repeat the form which his writing took in an environment which was, in many ways, different from ours. Otherwise we are in danger of making the same mistake in regard to the New Testament which the Pharisees of Jesus' day were making with respect to the Torah. There is no substitute for following Jesus' advice: 'Go and learn what this means' (Matthew 9:13).

Were Paul writing today, he would have written differently. But he is a pastor, concerned with the life of the Corinthian community, and, since he was closer to the situation than are we, we should assume that his advice was not only good, but required, for the peace of the community, for the growth in wisdom of the women involved, and for the good of the gospel in the actual situation prevailing in Corinth.

While our understanding of the divinely-ordered relationships between man and woman is no longer the same as Paul's, we can still learn from his teaching in this passage.

He reminds us that there is a unique and special grace in being man, and a unique and special grace in being woman. He reminds us that in our efforts to liberate each other from definitions that are restrictive and unjust, we must do so 'in the Lord', and out of love. As he said in the previous passage, we are to seek not our own advantage but that of the other (10:24,33). He reminds us, too, that we must retain a profound respect for the divine order in which men and women are different and are meant to mutually enrich and support each other. We see now that some of the ways in which Paul understood those differences were conditioned by his culture, but the fact remains that we can only be the poorer for denying or confusing the differences.

- Celebration of the Lord's Supper

I Corinthians 11:17-22

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions [σχισμα] among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions [αἵρεσις] among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is **not** really to eat **the Lord's supper**. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

Unfortunately Paul does not give us enough information here for us to be able confidently to reconstruct the manner in which the church in Corinth celebrated 'the Lord's supper', so named because it was a meal shared by the Christian community in memory of Jesus to nourish the fellowship Christians have with each other because of their communion with him. It is clear that it was celebrated in a home. It is also clear that it was celebrated in the evening. The formal proceedings, if we may speak in these terms, began with the breaking of bread and ended with drinking from the cup. In between was a meal. We can presume that people brought what they could afford and that the food was shared.

Perhaps the problem arose from the fact that size of the community prevented them all eating at the same table, and that when the people gathered for the Eucharist, they sat with their peers according to their social status (see 1:26), with the result that the well-off ate well and the others not. It was not a truly shared meal. They are coming together **‘as a church’** (ἐκκλησίαι), called there by the Lord, to share in **‘the Lord’s supper’** at **‘the table of the Lord’** (10:21), and the well-off are enjoying a better meal than the poor. This is another example of division (σχισμα, see 1:10; 12:25) in the community.

Paul looks beyond the human situation to that of divine providence, and sees in their **‘factions’** (αἵρεσις) God’s way of sorting out whose behaviour will stand up to the final judgment. His warning is clear. Their coming together to celebrate their communion is meant to be **‘for the better’**. In fact it tells against them.

I Corinthians 11:23-24

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was handed over took a loaf of bread, and giving thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'.

Luke 22:19

'Jesus took a loaf of bread, and giving thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'.

I Corinthians 11:25-26

In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying,: This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Luke 22:20

‘In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying: This cup *that is poured out for you* is the new covenant in my blood.’



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The Lord's supper celebrates the '**new covenant**'. The reference is to the meal which ratified the covenant made between God and the people at the time of Moses. The people declared: 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient' (Exodus 24:7). The blood of the slain animals was sprinkled on the altar, symbolising God, and on the people, thus uniting in a life-union both parties to the covenant. 'This', said Moses, 'is the blood of the covenant that God has made with you, containing all these rules' (Exodus 24:8). Then the elders ascended the mountain of God. 'They gazed on God, They ate and drank' (Exodus 24:11).

Jesus wants his disciples to ‘remember’, when his life is so brutally taken from him, that he is not just a victim of his enemies. He has always given himself for them. On the cross this self-giving will reach its consummation. When he breaks bread this night and when he shares the blood-red wine, he gives them a special meaning symbolising the final offering he is about to make. When they take and eat this bread, he wants them to know that it is his body (his person) they are taking. He is giving everything he is and everything he has done in sharing the human condition: his weakness, his brokenness, his dying — and all as a gift of love to nourish them on their journey to the Father. When they take the wine and drink it, he wants them to know that it is his life poured out for them that he is offering them. It is his Spirit that they are drinking into their thirsty souls. Yes, his life is about to be taken from him, but he wants them to know that he is giving it for them as his final act of love. When they share this meal, he wants them to ‘do this’, to do what he is doing.

I Corinthians 11:27-34

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

Paul has just reminded the Corinthians of Jesus' prophetic gesture at the last supper when he gave them broken bread and poured out wine to share, proclaiming what was about to happen to him and what it meant to him as a self-offering for them. Jesus wanted them to receive the offering he was making of himself when they received the broken bread and the poured out wine. He wanted them, when they shared this meal, to be bound together in love through their communion with him.

We have already seen serious failures in the way that the Corinthians are behaving during what was supposed to be a sharing in Jesus' Eucharistic meal. They must partake of this meal in a manner that is consistent with Jesus' gift of himself in love. To eat the bread of the Lord and to drink his cup while failing to give one's own body and to pour out one's own life in love is to make a lie of the Eucharist. They must answer to God for such behaviour. We could repeat here Paul's words earlier in the letter: 'When you thus sin against members of your family [for whom Christ died] ... you sin against Christ' (8:12).

Paul urges them to take stock of their behaviour, and not to forget that they are partaking in 'the body': they are sharing in the communion of love won for them by Jesus' gift of his 'body'. To realise this demands that they do what Jesus did. If they do not, they will suffer the consequences of their failure. Perhaps, says Paul, some of the sufferings which have afflicted the community are to be seen in this light. If so, Paul reminds them that God uses such suffering to bring about repentance. Let them take warning from this and change their behaviour, lest they find themselves condemned in the final judgment.

Rather than the well-off enjoying a pleasant meal with their associates while their poorer brothers and sisters go hungry, they should wait on one another, and let the shared meal be a statement of their shared life, the life of Jesus, broken, poured out and given to them. This is what it means to share 'the Lord's supper'.