

THIRD EDITION

# *Discovering* **BIBLICAL EQUALITY**

*Biblical, Theological, Cultural & Practical Perspectives*

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*Merrill Groothuis*

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TO REBECCA MERRILL GROOTHUIS (1954–2018):

*original coeditor, dear friend, and colleague,*

*and beloved sister in Christ*

Her unwavering commitment to

the inspiration and authority of Scripture,

her keen editorial eye, her razor-sharp mind,

and her deep love for Jesus laid the firm

foundation for this third edition of

*Discovering Biblical Equality.*

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## MUTUALITY IN MARRIAGE AND SINGLENESS

**1 CORINTHIANS 7:1–40**

*Ronald W. Pierce and Elizabeth A. Kay*

### INTRODUCTION

One searches in vain for an extended and focused study of **1 Corinthians 7:1–40** by an evangelical scholar addressing Paul’s sweeping call here for mutuality in marriage and singleness, specifically as it relates to the contemporary evangelical gender debate.<sup>1</sup> Instead, both sides of this controversy—those advocating for male leadership and those advocating for shared leadership—make only brief and occasional references to individual sections of this chapter, and usually with little to no reference to its larger context.<sup>2</sup> For

<sup>1</sup> The earliest and most extensive discussion is in Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 266–356. Two other egalitarians address this chapter’s significance in a few pages each: Philip B. Payne, “**1 Corinthians 7: The Equal Rights of Man and Woman in Marriage**,” in *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 105–8; and Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 95–96. These are, of course, aside from efforts to reconstruct the theological and cultural backdrop of this text and address its numerous exegetical challenges. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 484–87, 545–46, and 566–67 for working.

example, the two standard, evangelical anthologies on the gender debate—*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* and *Discovering Biblical Equality*—comment only on 1 Corinthians 7:3–5 while ignoring their relevance to the chapter’s larger context. John Piper and Wayne Grudem acknowledge Paul’s emphasis on “mutuality,” yet ignore the force of this chapter as a whole by claiming this emphasis does not “nullify the husband’s responsibility for general leadership”—a concept that appears nowhere in the text.<sup>3</sup> In comparison, seven contributors over five chapters in earlier editions of *Discovering Biblical Equality* address these verses in a way that is consistent with the chapter’s overall tone—though still only briefly. Out of these, Gordon Fee is the only one who alludes to the chapter’s coherent argument by noting, “The mutuality argued for in 1 Corinthians 7:1–16 stands all by itself in the literature of the ancient world.”<sup>4</sup>

As evangelicals, we have wrongly neglected this text on many counts. First, Paul’s remarks here are three times longer than any gender-related passage in his other letters—in fact, roughly equal to the length of all of his other comments on this subject taken together.<sup>5</sup> Second, he addresses no fewer than twelve related, yet distinct, issues regarding mutuality for men and women in marriage and singleness—again, more than in any other text.<sup>6</sup> Third, his

<sup>2</sup> RBMW; Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> RBMW, 109–10.

<sup>4</sup> In *Discovering Biblical Equality*, see Gordon Fee, 181; Walter Liefeld, 262; Judith and Jack Balswick, 460; Mimi Haddad and Alvera Mickelsen, 490; and Alice Mathews, 500.

<sup>5</sup> In the Greek text, 1 Cor 7:1–40 includes approximately 687 words, in comparison to a combined total of 680 words in 1 Cor 11:2–16 (227); Eph 5:21–33 (196); 1 Tim 2:8–15 (97); Titus 2:2–6 (52); Gal 3:26–29 (53); 1 Cor 14:34–35 (36); and Col 3:18–19 (19).

<sup>6</sup> The number of distinct issues was first noted by Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 288,

rhetoric is explicitly, consistently, and intentionally gender inclusive, meaning that the language used seeks to include both genders in each statement or principle—while at the same time reflecting a carefully balanced sense of mutuality.<sup>7</sup> Fourth, Paul wrote [1 Corinthians 7](#) in AD 55, around the time of his Galatians letter (AD 49–55), in which he declares that race, class, and gender are irrelevant for how we value one another regarding both status in Christ ([Gal 3:28](#)) and relationships in the church community ([Gal 3:3; 5:1, 7, 16, 25](#)), though they remain salient features of personal identity and interpersonal relationships.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, it seems prudent to consider [1 Corinthians 7](#) as an important point of reference for other—and mostly later—New Testament gender texts ([1 Cor 11; 14; Eph 5; Col 3; 1 Pet 3; 1 Tim 3; Titus 2](#)), serving as a more comprehensive statement against which these may be interpreted. It is a collection of “seed ideas” that grow into Paul’s larger theology of gender.<sup>9</sup> To be clear, [1 Corinthians 7](#) should not be used to nullify or diminish the teachings of other texts. However,

and acknowledged more recently by Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 515. Compare ten virtues and vices in [Titus 2](#), two prescriptions in [Eph 5](#) and [Col 3](#), four admonitions in [1 Tim 2](#), two issues addressed in [1 Cor 11](#), two concerns in [1 Cor 14](#), and the single principle of practicing Christian oneness in [Gal 3](#).

<sup>7</sup> This is remarkable considering its cultural context. Paul always includes specific reference to both men and women, yet varies the sequence. Men are mentioned first seven times ([1 Cor 7:2, 12–15, 17](#)), women, four times ([1 Cor 7:3–4, 10–11, 16](#)), and “each other” language is used once ([1 Cor 7:5](#)). It is a kind of gender symmetry or parallelism. See Glen G. Scorgie, *The Journey Back to Eden: Restoring the Creator’s Design for Women and Men* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 120, 142–44.

<sup>8</sup> Paul does not distinguish biological sex from the concept of gender as a social construct.

<sup>9</sup> William J. Webb, “A Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic,” in Pierce and Groothuis, *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 391.

this text must be afforded its own important voice in the evangelical dialogue.

## PRINCIPLES OF MUTUALITY IN MARRIAGE ([1 COR 7:1-16](#))

In response to an earlier letter from the Corinthian church, Paul writes to confront a distorted view of spirituality, celibacy, marriage, and the end of the age.<sup>10</sup> He advises his readers to remain as they were when first called to Christ, because being single or married is irrelevant for personal spirituality and devotion to ministry.<sup>11</sup> But Paul also appends to this advice twelve marriage-related principles for practical living by which it becomes clear that the occasion of his remarks is not fully the same as his purpose.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps he has in mind Jesus' words about living "like God's angels in heaven" ([Mt 22:30](#)); see Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [12](#), [269](#), [290](#), [330](#).

Celibacy at the time was skewed by the idea that human sexuality was a part of the fallen nature of humanity. As sexual activity became to be seen as fallen, it led Christians in Corinth to believe that celibacy was the better path, not because they were called into this lifestyle but because they were being led to believe that marriage and sexuality would alienate them "from God on an anthropological level." This line of thought came to be known as asceticism. See Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), [214-19](#).

<sup>11</sup> Throughout [1 Cor 7](#), Paul reveals his personal preference for singleness ([1 Cor 7:1, 6-8, 32-35, 38](#)) to serve God with an undivided heart in a world that is passing away ([1 Cor 7:26, 29-31](#)). At the same time, he acknowledges that each believer has his or her own "gift from God" ([1 Cor 7:7](#)), which means for some getting married to avoid immorality ([1 Cor 7:2, 5, 9, 36](#)) and for others celibate singleness.

<sup>12</sup> This is not the "complete Pauline teaching concerning marriage" (Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [493-95](#)). However, all twelve issues relate either to marriage or singleness (Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [270](#)). Thus, the entire context might be viewed as a discussion about the question of marriage.

More specifically, it is Paul’s way of framing these twelve principles that catches the eye of the careful reader. Here, he does not address the man as “head” of the women, as he does in [1 Corinthians 11:3](#) and [Ephesians 5:23](#). Nor does he refer to believers in the generic masculine (e.g., [1 Cor 7:24, 29](#), and many other instances)—though this was a common convention of his time. Instead, his rhetoric is at the same time gender specific (he addresses men and women individually) and gender inclusive (the principles clearly apply to both genders). It is never gender exclusive in the sense of a principle applying to one gender and not the other. Such an emphasis on mutuality is striking given the general assumptions toward patriarchy in both the Roman and Jewish traditions of Paul’s day.

**1. Fidelity in marriage: Each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband ([1 Cor 7:2](#)).**<sup>13</sup> Although sexual immorality is the stated occasion for Paul’s first principle, he says more than is necessary to address this concern. With explicit and precisely mirrored language (*anēr/andros* and *gynē*), he addresses the husband and the wife individually. Although Paul later addresses men and women regarding this matter in separate contexts (that is, husbands in [1 Tim 3:2, 12](#); wives in [1 Tim 5:9](#)), his commitment to mutual fidelity in marriage remains the common denominator.

By calling each man to be faithful to his own wife and each woman to her own husband, Paul condemns in principle a broad range of unbiblical sexual activity, such as fornication (sexual intercourse outside marriage), adultery, homosexuality—and, by extension, polygamy.<sup>14</sup> Even though men have more

<sup>13</sup> These twelve numbered headers contain representative and condensed paraphrases of the texts under consideration.

<sup>14</sup> The practice of a man having multiple wives (also known as polygyny) has been far more common across ancient and modern cultures than that of a woman having multiple husbands (polyandry). Moreover, in the Greco-Roman culture of Paul’s day, abuse of

commonly perpetuated some of these behaviors throughout history, Paul is committed here to addressing men and women in a mutual way.

**2. Spousal obligations:** *The husband should give to his wife sexual intimacy, and likewise the wife also to her husband* ([1 Cor 7:3](#)). Paul's concern with sexual immorality continues as he calls believers to offer to their spouses what is rightfully theirs: regular and voluntary sexual intimacy. They are to give generously, not depriving each other. The longer statement addresses the husband's obligation first; then a shorter, mirrored statement speaks to wives.<sup>15</sup> However, the inclusive, compound conjunction "and likewise also" (*homoiōs de kai*) makes it clear that the same obligation evenhandedly applies to both.

The Greek phrase *opheilēn apodidotō*, "to fulfill one's duty," connotes a voluntary repaying of a debt or obligation to another. In the most intimate aspect of marriage, Paul emphasizes surrendering to one another, not exercising or asserting one's own rights.<sup>16</sup> In this case, the husband—the one with greater power and social status—is called on first to yield by giving what rightfully belongs to his wife. Then, to be complete, the wife is told the same obligation

marital fidelity was rampant. Demosthenes, a Greek statesman and orator from Athens, summed it up this way: "Courtesans were for companionship, concubines to meet everyday sexual needs, and wives to tend the house and bear legitimate children." Cited by Alison Le Cornu in *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 653.

The lexical meaning of *exetō* (NRSV "sexual immorality") is "to stand in a close relationship to someone." See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Fredrick William Danker, electronic version 1.3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 420.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek word order in [1 Cor 7:3](#) puts the wife first in both clauses, though in the first clause she is the object of the preposition, while the husband is the subject of the sentence.

<sup>16</sup> [Ephesians 5](#) shows this is done out of a place of love.

applies to her. Such mutuality regarding marital rights is remarkable in a predominantly patriarchal world.

Paul's language here reflects what is often seen in marriage contracts in both Jewish and Roman cultures. In a marriage certificate from 92 BC, the husband is obliged to give the wife what she is owed, in this case, clothing and "the rest."<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the wife's family had to give to the husband what was owed (e.g., a dowry). So, while Paul broadly says that the husband and the wife are each to fulfill their marital duty, there is an undertone of a marriage contract that would have been evident to the Corinthian church. Paul may here be referring to a specific aspect the Corinthians were inquiring about in their letter to him, or he may be speaking generally in that each should give to the other what is owed. As the passage progresses, Paul further expands on what it means to fulfill their marital duty.

**3. Yielding authority:** *Neither the wife nor the husband has authority over their own body—that goes to the other (1 Cor 7:4)*. Much debate has occurred during the last few decades among evangelicals regarding the notion of men's authority or leadership over women in society, church, and home.<sup>18</sup> In this

<sup>17</sup> Marriage certificate from 92 BC in Tebtunis Egypt (Tebtunis Papyri 1.104.G), see David Instone-Brewer, "[1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Graeco-Roman Marriage and Divorce Papyri](#)," *Tyndale Bulletin* 52 (2001): 108. See also Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), chap. 5.

<sup>18</sup> The usual point of reference for male-leadership arguments is Wayne Grudem's "[The Meaning of \*kephalē\* \('Head'\): An Evaluation of New Evidence Real and Alleged](#)," in *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 552–99. In addition, Robert L. Saucy and Clinton B. Arnold argue that "subordination" is "inherent" in Paul's references to "order" (*hypotassō*): see Saucy and Arnold, "[Woman and Man in Apostolic Teaching](#)," in

context, it is imperative to point out that [1 Corinthians 7:4](#) is the only biblical text that directly and explicitly addresses the question of “authority” (*exousia*) in marriage—and here it is clearly mutual.<sup>19</sup> Paul first balances personal rights with a model of giving what is due the recipient: sexual intimacy ([1 Cor 7:3](#)). Then, he broadens his call to include the principle of *yielding* the presumed “authority” of a marriage partner rather than *wielding* it ([1 Cor 7:4](#)). Like his call to fidelity in [1 Corinthians 7:2](#), the dual commands here are set in precisely mirrored language. By doing so, Paul goes out of his way to be gender inclusive, by calling for “functional unity and mutual submission” in “the most patriarchal of settings in the ancient world—the bedroom.”<sup>20</sup>

*Women and Men in Ministry: A Complementary Perspective*, ed. Robert L. Saucy and Judith K. TenElshof (Chicago: Moody, 2001), [114–21](#). The most thorough egalitarian response to Grudem’s work is Payne, *Man and Woman: One in Christ*, [117–37, 271–90](#). On the debate over headship and the Trinity, see the chapter by Kevin Giles in this volume.

<sup>19</sup> Paul addresses women teaching men in [1 Tim 2:12](#) but uses *authentein* instead of the more common *exousia*, found here and in [1 Cor 11:10](#). However, its meaning in [1 Tim 2](#) is uncertain as it is the only occurrence of the word in the New Testament. It could connote “exercising authority, usurping authority, or a domineering style of teaching.” See Linda L. Belleville, “[Teaching and Usurping Authority in the Assemblies: 1 Timothy 2:11–15](#),” in this volume.

<sup>20</sup> Michelle Lee-Barnewall, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), [183](#). Piper and Grudem’s only comment is that [1 Cor 7:4](#) does not “nullify the husband’s [alleged] responsibility for general leadership in marriage” (which is never mentioned in the Bible). They acknowledge the emphasis on mutuality in this passage, but then go on to diminish this principle by insisting that the husband as head should be the one to develop “the pattern of intimacy” for both himself and his wife (*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, [109–10](#)). Scripture nowhere suggests such a qualification.

The uniqueness, content, and tone of this verse make it more important in the gender-role debate than most have been inclined to acknowledge. Paul's point is that neither spouse should claim authority even over their own body. Instead, each should yield that authority to the other. Such radical servanthood was modeled by Jesus, who enjoys equal power and authority within the [Trinity](#), yet chose a life of sacrificial service ([Mt 23:8–12](#); [Phil 2:5–8](#)). In the same way, Paul calls for mutual yielding of authority among human beings—especially spouses. One might say that he stands the traditional notion of male headship on its head (as he is inclined to do elsewhere; see [1 Cor 11:8–9, 11–12](#); [Eph 5:21, 25–28](#)).<sup>21</sup> Just as Jesus chose to yield his rights, so both men and women should do the same.

Such a radical call to yield authority in marital intimacy could possibly serve as a paradigm for surrendering authority in other areas of marriage, since it is the only explicit statement regarding authority in marriage in Scripture. David Garland goes so far as to suggest that “body” (*sōma*) in [1 Corinthians 7:4](#) “does not refer simply to the physical body ... but to their whole physical-spiritual existence.”<sup>22</sup> Further, the notion of a husband “exercising” authority over his wife runs counter to the direction and force of this statement. Yet still many reject this idea based on two texts where the metaphorical use of “head” (*kephalē*) appears regarding husbands.

First, Paul uses the same noun for “authority” (*exousia*) in [1 Corinthians 11:10](#), where he declares that “a woman ought to have authority over her head” when praying or prophesying in the assembly. However, it is not clear there whether Paul is referring to the abstract idea of authority (the woman choosing how she might cover her head) or a tangible symbol of authority (some kind of head

<sup>21</sup> The inverted head imagery is suggested by Lee-Barnewall in her insightful chapter “Marriage, Part 2: Husbands and Wives in Ephesians 5,” in *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian*.

<sup>22</sup> David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 259.

covering). Nor is it clear whether the woman's authority should be over her literal head (topmost part of her body) or over her figurative head (her husband, who is called her head in [1 Cor 11:2](#)). In addition, the term translated "head" (*kephalē*) can carry the force of "authority over," but also can connote "preeminence, ground of being, or life-giving source." In contrast to this maze of interpretive challenges, the command to yield authority over one's body in [1 Corinthians 7:4](#) is relatively straightforward.<sup>23</sup> Such clarity should help readers avoid the mistake of imposing an unbiblical prescription of a husband's authority over his wife on other New Testament texts.

Second, though Paul does not explicitly mention authority in [Ephesians 5](#), he instructs the wife to "submit herself" to her husband (who was construed culturally as the head of the Roman household) as part of the apostle's principle of "submitting to one another" in the church ([Eph 5:21–22, 24](#)).<sup>24</sup> Though *kephalē* ("head") in the head-body metaphor may connote "authority over" or "source of provision" in the larger contexts of both [Ephesians](#) ([Eph 1:20–23; 4:15–16](#)) and [Colossians](#) ([Col 1:18–29; 2:9–15, 18–19](#)), Paul only reinforces the idea of "source of provision" for husbands to wives.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, he calls husbands to love their wives sacrificially as Christ did for the church ([Eph 5:25–30](#))—again, standing *kephalē* on its head. As "head" of his wife, the husband is commanded to love

<sup>23</sup> On exegetical difficulties in [1 Cor 11:2–16](#), see Gordon D. Fee's essay in this volume, "Praying and Prophesying in the Assemblies: [1 Corinthians 11:2–16](#)," as well as the comprehensive treatise by Payne, *Man and Woman: One in Christ*, chaps. 6–13.

<sup>24</sup> The eldest male bears the title *paterfamilias*, denoting him as head of the Roman household. It is often the case that this would be the husband or grandfather within a family.

<sup>25</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, "Jesus Christ: 'Head' of the Church," in *Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 346–66.

her—not to exercise leadership or authority over her—however benevolent that might be.

In the end, [1 Corinthians 7:4](#) remains the only explicit statement in all of Scripture about authority (*exousia*) within marriage—and here both the husband and the wife are called to yield it to the other in the deeply personal context of sexual intimacy. Again, as Paul’s earliest statement about marriage relations, this text should serve as a reference point for later texts—not to nullify those that are equally clear but to help clarify those that are not.

*4. Consent for abstinence: Do not deprive one another, except consensually and for a limited time of focused prayer, then come together again to avoid temptation (1 Cor 7:5).* On occasion, personal devotion to extended times of fasting, study, and prayer can disrupt marital intimacy. When this happens, Paul insists that mutual consent be reached first with one’s spouse. Though his “one another” language here is more concise than before, he once again emphasizes mutual yielding rather than the notion that either spouse should exercise a leadership role.<sup>26</sup> This undermines the dysfunctional behavior in many patriarchal marriages today where the husband exercises authority over his wife, who counters with more manipulative forms of control such as withholding sexual intimacy.

Taken as a larger thought unit, [1 Corinthians 7:3–5](#) presents mutual partnership as a model for marriage relationships—one that includes, among

<sup>26</sup> Although the exact phrases vary slightly, the same “one another” idea is expressed with regard to at least eighteen different applications of Paul’s essential principle of mutuality: unity, kindness, honor, humility, grace, strength, attitude, hospitality, accountability ([Rom 12:5, 10, 16; 14:13, 19; 15:5, 7, 14; 16:16](#)), intimate generosity, care ([1 Cor 7:5; 12:25](#)), service, help ([Gal 5:13; 6:2](#)), patience, truth telling, forgiveness, submission ([Eph 4:2, 25, 32; 5:21](#)), love, and comfort ([1 Thess 3:12; 4:18](#)). A Christian model of mutuality plays a significant role in Pauline theology.

other things, mutual consent in processing marital decisions. At the same time, it militates against the long-standing and culturally endorsed notion that Paul's call for the wife to submit to her husband in [Ephesians 5:22–24](#) should be interpreted to mandate the responsibility for a husband to exercise authority—however gracious or self-sacrificing—as head over his wife.<sup>27</sup> Whereas Paul clearly calls for voluntary and mutual submission in marriage (including that of the wife), nowhere does he or any other biblical writer instruct a husband to exercise authority over his wife.<sup>28</sup>

*5. Loss of a spouse through death: It is good for widowers and widows to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, let them remarry ([1 Cor 7:8–9](#)).* Paul addresses the human inclination toward “sensual desires” (see [1 Tim 5:11–14](#)) throughout this text, but not in an exclusive way. The terms for widowed men and women differ slightly, yet are virtually synonymous in this context—clearly implying that the same principle of remaining as one was when called applies to both.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the variance reveals a contrast in the persistent cultural reality for men and women who have lost

<sup>27</sup> See this argument in George W. Knight III, “Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church,” in Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 231.

<sup>28</sup> Contrary to those who argue that wives should be “ordered under” husbands in a “subordinate position,” while husbands are to exercise “authority over” their wives as benevolent “leaders and providers.” See Saucy and Arnold, “Woman and Man in Apostolic Teaching,” [117–19](#), [133–38](#).

<sup>29</sup> The alternate NIV translation has “widowers” for men; also see Thiselton’s argument (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [515–16](#)). The variance between the generic term “unmarried men/widowers” (similar to “unmarried women/widows” in [1 Cor 7:34](#)) and the more explicit term “widows” in [1 Cor 7:8](#) is not as great as it may seem. The context of this chapter, as well as the specific parallel in this verse, confirms the meaning of “widowers” in [1 Cor 7:8a](#).

spouses to death. The change for women has generally been much more dramatic throughout history, while that for men has been relatively minimal. However, though Paul certainly recognizes these differences, his advice is the same to both regardless of gender.

**6. Initiating divorce with a believing spouse: The wife should not separate from her husband, and the husband should not divorce his wife (1 Cor 7:10–11).** Here, the wife is addressed first, more extensively, and with slightly different language. She should not “separate from” her husband, whereas he is not to “send away or divorce” his wife. Yet again, the variance may reflect the reality of Paul’s day, when a man generally had greater power to bring about a divorce than a woman. But the difference is not substantive, as evidenced by Paul’s inclusive use of the stronger term for divorce for both marriage partners in 1 Corinthians 7:12–13. In the end, the actions he prohibits, left unchecked with either spouse, could lead to the dissolution of the marriage.

In addition, Paul tells the wife that, if she leaves her husband, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled. Yet, given the larger context of this chapter, the wife’s call to reconciliation should be understood to apply equally to the husband. Though Paul’s reason for addressing the wife first and more extensively is not clear, it continues to serve his apparent interests in constructing a balanced theology of gender roles. By doing so, Paul empowers the woman in the relationship as she is called to exercise her will in the matter, while still encouraging her to stay in the marriage. In contrast, there is no greater responsibility or burden placed on the man. Instead, wives and husbands must share the challenge of staying together.

**7. Initiating divorce with an unbelieving spouse: If any brother has a nonbelieving wife who consents to stay in the marriage, he should not divorce her. If any woman has an unbelieving husband who consents to stay in the marriage, she should not divorce him (1 Cor 7:12–13).** Paul continues his emphasis on mutuality in sustaining and nurturing a marriage, though here he

addresses the problem of already-existing marriages with nonbelievers. Once again, his language of “brother” (*adelphos*) versus “wife” (*gynē*) varies slightly, yet the difference remains insignificant, as the woman being addressed is certainly a sister in Christ (see [1 Cor 7:15](#)).

Scripture makes it clear that God opposes a believer marrying outside the faith, as well as initiating divorce with one’s spouse ([1 Cor 7:10–13](#))—though the latter is permitted in extreme circumstances.<sup>30</sup> With this larger backdrop in mind, Paul calls the believing spouse (husband or wife) to extend grace to the one who does not yet believe. Again, the decision is not presented as the primary responsibility of the husband or wife, but that of the believing spouse. This is similar to Paul’s principle that spiritually mature believers are to help restore those who have sinned ([Gal 6:1](#)).

In Paul’s day, as multiple cultures were converging, there was some

<sup>30</sup> Instructive examples of God’s opposition to a believer marrying outside the faith include Abraham’s search for a bride for Isaac ([Gen 24](#)), Samson’s escapades with Philistine women ([Judg 13–16](#)), Solomon’s pagan wives who turned his heart from Yahweh ([1 Kings 11](#)), the infamous Jezebel ([1 Kings 16–2 Kings 9](#)), and, especially, Paul’s prohibition against being unequally yoked ([2 Cor 6](#)). The law of Moses prohibits divorce under certain circumstances ([Deut 22:19, 29](#)), yet allows for a “certificate of divorce” in other cases ([Deut 24:1, 3](#)). Later, Malachi asserts, “God hates divorce” ([Mal 2:16](#)). Regarding divorce initiated by an abused spouse, see the helpful discussion by Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 93–106. Ironically, Ezra actually insists that the postexilic Jews send away their pagan wives from the Judean community ([Ezra 9–10](#)). Later, Jesus grants exceptions for divorce in cases of “sexual immorality” (compare the identical language in [Mt 19:9](#) NIV with [1 Cor 7:2](#)). Jesus’ ruling indicates that Moses’ original exception was because of the hardness of human hearts ([Mt 19:7–8](#)). Such exceptions may suggest the possibility of separation or divorce under other unusually severe circumstances, such as spousal abuse.

consistency regarding marriage and divorce contracts and traditions, but there were also variants between the cultures. For example, Greek and Roman marriage contracts allowed for the possibility that marriage might end in separation or divorce, so stipulations regarding this were built into the contract itself. In contrast, Jewish marriages contracts generally assumed that a marriage would not end until the death of one of the partners. So, in Corinth, where there was a strong Gentile population, divorce would have been seen as an acceptable way to deal with marital differences. Therefore, it was relatively easier for a divorce to take place. Paul is fighting against this understanding of divorce and encourages those who are in marriages with a nonbeliever to hold strong. Since the culture permitted the husband to leave without notice, Paul is intentional in noting that one should not be held accountable for a separation or divorce if one was not the initiator.

*8. Sanctification of a nonbelieving spouse: The nonbelieving husband is made holy because of the believing wife, and the nonbelieving wife is made holy because of the believing brother. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy (1 Cor 7:14).* Again, the language of “wife” (*gynē*) versus “husband/brother” (*anēr/adelphos*) appears, as it did in *1 Corinthians 7:12–13*. Yet, again, the difference is not significant for two reasons: Paul is clearly equating the “brother” (*1 Cor 7:14b*) with the “husband” in the previous clause (*1 Cor 7:14a*), and the idea of a spouse who does not yet believe being “made holy” (*hagiastai*) by the other spouse is applied mutually to both husband and wife.

Though it falls outside the scope of this chapter to speculate on all Paul means by the “sanctification” of spouses and children, at the least, an unbelieving spouse remaining with a believer sets himself or herself aside (along with their children) for holy purposes.<sup>31</sup> That is to say, they remain under the sanctifying

<sup>31</sup> In Paul’s writings, the term *hagiastai* usually carries “moral/ethical implications” and

influence of the believing spouse—regardless of their gender. Moreover, it is clear that to whatever extent one can be sanctified through one's spouse, such sanctification is mutual for both the husband and the wife.

Further, this text must be allowed to inform our interpretation of Paul's instructions to husbands to love their wives "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy [hagiasē]" ([Eph 5:25–26](#) NIV). Paul implies that husbands can have a sanctifying influence on their wives. However, such gender-specific language should not be read as gender exclusive.<sup>32</sup> On the contrary, [1 Corinthians 7:14](#) makes it clear with explicit, gender-inclusive language that spiritual benefit to a nonbelieving spouse can come from the wife to the husband as well. Keeping both texts in conversation can bring greater clarity to this aspect of the evangelical gender-role debate.

**9. Responsibility when the nonbelieving spouse leaves: If the nonbeliever leaves, let it be so. In such cases a brother or sister is not bound. God has called you to peace ([1 Cor 7:15](#)).** Paul's admonitions above regarding separation and divorce are now softened to words of grace as he addresses believing spouses in mixed marriages as "brother" (*adelphos*) and "sister" (*adelphē*) respectively. Such gender-inclusive language also clarifies the broader range of meaning in the generic masculine *apostos* for the nonbelieving spouse at the beginning of this verse. If the marriage between the believer and the nonbeliever were based on a Greco-Roman standard, there would be nothing that the believing spouse could

can even function as a metaphor for salvation ([1 Cor 1:30; 6:11](#)), though the force of the word is certainly not that strong here (Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [299–302](#)).

<sup>32</sup> Contra Talley, who argues for a benevolent-patriarchy model of sanctification in marriage based on implications drawn from Christ's sanctification of the church in [Eph 5:25–27](#), yet without reference to the more explicit and gender-inclusive mention of sanctification in the context of marriage in [1 Cor 7:14](#). See David L. Talley, "Gender and Sanctification: From Creation to Transformation," *JBMW* (Spring 2003): [6–16](#).

do to in order to keep the marriage together.<sup>33</sup> It was the custom that simply leaving the home, separating, would have been seen as a divorce, and the stipulations of an impending divorce would have been built into one's marriage contract. Based on this, Paul encourages the believing partner to be at peace, for they have done what they were able to do.

Each of the eight principles discussed previously has reflected the idea of mutual responsibility of a spouse *to* his or her partner, whereas this verse makes it clear that neither is responsible *for* the other. When a nonbeliever chooses to leave, believers who have tried their best to keep the marriage together are under no further obligation, for "God has called us to live in peace." This could mean the peace to remain within a religiously mixed marriage or the peace to let go of the relationship if the nonbelieving spouse insists.<sup>34</sup> Context suggests the latter.<sup>35</sup>

10. Salvation of a nonbelieving spouse: How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? ([1 Cor 7:16](#)). Keeping in mind the principle of being responsible *to*, but not *for*, Paul asks a rhetorical question with the same mirrored language of mutuality employed at the beginning of this chapter. In this way, he explores the possibility that the marital commitment of a believer (male or female) to a nonbeliever might lead to that person's salvation.

Surely, the spiritual benefit one human being can give to another only goes so

<sup>33</sup> Instone-Brewer, "1 Corinthians 7 in the Light," [241](#).

<sup>34</sup> See Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [304–5](#); Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [537–40](#).

<sup>35</sup> This is also consistent with Paul's earlier exhortation (based on a gospel of grace) that believers should stand firm in the liberty in which Christ has made them free ([Gal 5:1, 13](#)). It is reinforced by his later admonition, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" ([Rom 12:18](#) NIV).

far. It certainly falls short of Christ's effective benefit to save and sanctify the church. Yet, this passage suggests that we can partner with Christ as we aid nonbelieving spouses on their journey toward salvation and sanctification. At the same time, however, Paul makes it equally clear that neither of these potential benefits is limited to a husband or wife based on gender. On the contrary, with his consistent and explicitly inclusive language, Paul insists that these are mutually beneficial influences that either Christian spouse may have toward a partner who has not yet come to faith.

## THE COMPARATIVE ISSUES OF RACIAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS ([1 COR 7:17–24](#))

The “interactive significance” of race and slavery mentioned in these verses is essential to the larger discussion of Paul’s twelve principles for mutuality in marriage and singleness in [1 Corinthians 7](#).<sup>36</sup> It is not coincidental that he mentions Jew and Gentile ([1 Cor 7:17–20](#)), as well as slave and free ([1 Cor 7:21–24](#)), given his grouping of these categories with that of male and female in his foundational statement in [Galatians 3:26–29](#) (especially [Gal 3:28](#)). In Galatians his focus is on the former, whereas in Philemon it is on the latter. Here, it is on humanity as male and female.<sup>37</sup> The link that connects the three groups is the principle that believers do not need to change their status in order to live holy lives or to serve Christ better.

It is not at all certain that the Corinthians would have been aware of Paul’s circulating letter to the churches in the Galatian province; yet, the times of

<sup>36</sup> See Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [545–65](#).

<sup>37</sup> When Paul speaks of “male and female,” he is not excluding intersex persons but rather simply not referring to them. Elsewhere, Jesus mentions “eunuchs” ([Mt 19:12](#)), though these are not the equivalent to intersex persons, along with the goodness of celibate singleness. Further, eunuchs are explicitly honored by God in [Is 56:4–5](#).

writing the two letters are close enough that the reader can assume Paul still has the essential concern of Galatians: that the old categories of race, socioeconomic status, and gender are irrelevant in determining one's spiritual *and* functional equality in the new-covenant community.<sup>38</sup> To the Corinthians he argues, "circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing" ([1 Cor 7:19](#) NIV); and the slave is "the Lord's freed person," and "the one who was free when called is Christ's slave" ([1 Cor 7:22](#) NIV). A robust theology of mutuality ties these three representative groups together, making the principled statement in [Galatians 3:28](#) a point of reference for reading [1 Corinthians 7](#).

### PRINCIPLES OF MUTUALITY IN SINGLENESS ([1 COR 7:25–40](#))

**1. Thinking carefully before marriage: In view of the present distress it is good for a man or woman to remain as they are—single or married ([1 Cor 7:26–28a](#)).** This section may be addressing those men and women who have never been married, those who are already engaged, or both.<sup>39</sup> Consistent with one of his recurring themes in this chapter, Paul admonishes believers not to make a radical change in status because of the perceived nearness of the end of the age. Whether a man or woman is single, engaged, or married is irrelevant to functioning as a productive member of the new-covenant community.

In contrast to Paul's more balanced statements above, here he addresses the man more extensively. One cannot be sure whether this reflects a greater concern for the men than women at Corinth on this matter. Moreover, the woman is addressed here (as well as in [1 Cor 7:34](#)) as *parthenos* ("virgin") and *gynē*

<sup>38</sup> This perspective allows for the range of opinions on the dating of Galatians (AD 48–55) and agrees with the near consensus on the date of [1 Corinthians](#) (AD 55).

<sup>39</sup> Again, see Thiselton's discussion of the various options for the subjects of this section (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [565–71](#)) and Fee's (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [322–34](#)). The argument of this chapter, however, does not depend on answering this question.

(“woman”), whereas the man is referred to simply by the generic *anthropos* (“man”). The difference in terminology seems negligible, though it serves once more as an example of the diverse language used to describe gender mutuality that Paul paints across these twelve principles—the latter being a common thread throughout.

**2. Ministry and spiritual calling:** *Those who choose to marry—men or women—will face worldly problems, as well as distractions from undivided devotion to Christ (1 Cor 7:28b, 32–34).*<sup>40</sup> It is ironic—though not entirely surprising—that Paul ends his larger discussion of gender mutuality in marriage with a statement regarding singleness. He has woven the thread of his preference for celibate singleness throughout the chapter with the purpose of serving Christ more efficiently (1 Cor 7:1, 6–8, 26, 29–35, 38).

Often Paul’s focus in this chapter is perceived as being aimed toward those who are married. Though this passage contains prescriptions for marriage, the intent is not only this. Nor is the apostle merely pitting marriage against singleness. Rather, he follows his remarks on marriage to focus more broadly on the church family by showing how marriage relates to God’s larger purposes.<sup>41</sup> Too often, it is mistakenly concluded that marriage is the ultimate goal for a Christian, and singleness is for a season, or a lesser position, or for those especially gifted. But Paul negates these thoughts, stating that singleness is ultimately more favorable than marriage in regard to God’s kingdom plan.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Over time, the church has begun to raise marriage to such a high value that as a result it has begun to undervalue singleness. As Paul points out in this chapter, though, singleness is a calling, and there are certain things that make it more beneficial when it comes to looking at kingdom values. Those who remain single are able to serve God without their heart being pulled in different directions, and they also have the freedom to serve the church in ways that those who are married are unable to do.

<sup>41</sup> See Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 90.

Therefore, the focus of this essay has not been on marriage as opposed to singleness—though an equally important topic. Rather, the issue at hand has been the remarkable, gender-inclusive way that Paul goes about his task, correcting the Corinthian church’s view on both singleness and marriage. His closing statements remind the reader that ministry priorities, responsibilities, and privileges apply mutually to both men and women, whether devotion to prayer that distracts from sexual intimacy ([1 Cor 7:5](#)) or devotion to ministry that avoids the distractions of marriage altogether ([1 Cor 7:28](#)).

One last time in his concluding thoughts, Paul addresses women shoulder-to-shoulder alongside men, making it clear that either may choose devotion to ministry instead of marriage. This runs contrary to the stubbornly persistent cultural tradition that a young woman should have as her goal in life to find a good husband who will lead and care for her—in fact radically countercultural, because women, in Paul’s day, were greatly dependent on marriage. Their livelihood was based on their family or that of their husband. So as Paul encourages singleness, he also calls for a radical change in lifestyle. Women would have to be dependent on themselves or on the church if they were to remain unmarried.<sup>43</sup> So, whether it concerns the question of marriage or singleness in faithful service to Christ and the church, one of Paul’s clear themes in this chapter is an equal sense of gender mutuality.

## CONCLUSIONS

This brief survey of [1 Corinthians 7](#) is intended to begin a dialogue that will reframe the discussion of this important yet neglected text. Perhaps it will provide some fresh thinking toward a fresh approach to this passage in the

<sup>42</sup> Hellerman, *When the Church Was*, 91.

<sup>43</sup> Conversely, Paul encourages young widows to remarry so that their “sensual desires” do not “overcome their dedication to Christ” ([1 Tim 5:11–14](#)).

context of the evangelical gender debate. Hopefully, a more extensive study of [1 Corinthians 7](#) with a focus on its relevance to the evangelical gender-role debate will emerge in the near future. Until then, a few tentative conclusions can be drawn.

First, both celibate singleness and faithful marriage should have legitimate and honored places in our churches. Paul's argument is: "If you're not ready to embrace a godly and mutual marriage relationship, perhaps you should stay single. And, if you're not ready to embrace godly celibate singleness, perhaps you should consider marriage. But remember, godly devotion to Christ is more important than either!"

Second, by writing [1 Corinthians 7](#) around the same time as his letter to the Galatians, Paul's language of even-handed gender mutuality contrasts sharply with what one might expect from a first-century writer—Jewish or Roman. Yet, it coheres with the cryptic—though more famous—declaration in [Galatians 3:28](#), being most likely his first occasional expansion on the “new creation” model of radical oneness in Christ (see [Gal 6:15](#); [2 Cor 5:17](#)).<sup>44</sup> Though Paul's words do not address every aspect of marriage, this twelve-part statement is the most comprehensive made on the subject in Scripture—and, as such, it deserves much more attention in the contemporary evangelical dialogue on gender.

Third, as an early point of reference, this text shines the positive light of gender-inclusive mutuality on other statements in both contemporary and later gender texts in the Bible ([1 Cor 11; 14](#); [Eph 5](#); [Col 3](#); [1 Pet 3](#); [1 Tim 3](#); [Titus 2](#)). By doing so, it helps to clarify important issues in this debate—such as yielding of authority (otherwise referred to by Paul in [Eph 5:21](#) as “submitting to one another”) and the giving of spiritual benefits (leading to sanctification and salvation) that a believer may give to a spouse in marriage.

In sum, this chapter paints a portrait of the beauty of mutuality in intimate,

<sup>44</sup> Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 527.

personal relationships—sexual or not, and whether one remains single or chooses to marry.<sup>45</sup> It is the fully inclusive complementarity that was intended when God first said of Adam, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him” ([Gen 2:18](#), author’s translation). Of course, for the sake of being fruitful, multiplying, and filling the earth, that narrative involved what later came to be known as marriage. Yet, Paul extends it to mutuality in singleness as well here in [1 Corinthians 7](#). In both we can find God’s gift of mutuality in “a covenantal, God-imaging, self-sacrificial relationship of faithfulness and love” in the service of Christ.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> On the challenges related to finding intimate, nonerotic relationships in the spiritual family of God, see Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015).

<sup>46</sup> Paul Gardner, [1 Corinthians](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 306.

# 7

## PRAYING AND PROPHESYING IN THE ASSEMBLIES

### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

*Gordon D. Fee*

The interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 has long been a major crux in the study of Paul’s letters.<sup>1</sup> This is mostly because several key aspects of the passage are shrouded in mystery, including the specific nature of the sociocultural issue Paul is addressing, what the Corinthian women (presumably) were doing that called forth this response, how Paul’s response works as an argument, and especially the meaning of several crucial terms.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the

<sup>1</sup> This is illustrated in part by the considerable differences of interpretation to be found in three recent major commentaries in English: Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987); R. F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999); Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000). Necessary limitations of space for each chapter in this book prohibit lengthy interaction with the wide range of options available. I apologize in advance to some scholars who will feel slighted by what I have done—but this is written as an essay rather than an academic piece that would give proper recognition to the work of others.

<sup>2</sup> Including (1) the meaning of *head*, which seems to fluctuate between the literal physical head on one’s body and the (not totally clear) metaphorical use posited in 1 Cor 11:3; (2) the phrase in 1 Cor 11:4–5 translated “head covered” in most English versions, literally “having down the head”; (3) the word for “uncovered” in 1 Cor 11:5, 13; (4) the phrase

argumentation as a whole is especially uncharacteristic of Paul, both in terms of his generally relaxed attitude to the presenting issue itself and of his arguing primarily on the basis of cultural shame rather than from the person and work of Christ. And finally, the basic datum in [1 Corinthians 11:5](#), that women are here assumed to pray and prophesy in the gathered community, stands in stark contrast to the requirement of absolute silence “in church” in [1 Corinthians 14:34–35](#).<sup>3</sup>

Yet despite these many uncertainties, acknowledged in part by almost everyone who has written on this passage, one may still find some who are bold to assert that this passage teaches “that women should pray and prophesy in a manner that makes it clear that they submit to male leadership.”<sup>4</sup> In light of what Paul actually says—or does not say—such an assertion is made with a great deal more confidence than a straightforward exegesis of the passage would seem to allow.

Limitations of space do not permit me to deal with all the issues raised above. For our present purposes, five matters will be addressed: (1) the nature of the issue that called forth this response, (2) the structure of Paul’s argument as a whole, (3) the significance of “praying and prophesying,” (4) the meaning of the

“authority over her head” in [1 Cor 11:10](#); (5) the prepositional phrase “because of the angels” in [1 Cor 11:10](#); (6) the preposition *anti* in [1 Cor 11:15](#), which ordinarily means “in place of”; and (7) the clause “we have no such custom” in [1 Cor 11:16](#), which most English translations (illegitimately?) render “we have no *other* custom.”

<sup>3</sup> This, of course, is a problem only for those who consider [1 Cor 14:34–35](#) authentic. For an argument against its authenticity, with some rejoinder to those who have objected to this view as presented in my commentary, see Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 272–81.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity: [1 Corinthians 11:2–16](#),” in *RBMW*, 176.

metaphorical use of *head* in 1 Corinthians 11:3, and (5) the meaning of 1 Corinthians 11:10 in the argument of 1 Corinthians 11:7–12.

## THE PRESENTING ISSUE IN CORINTH

In 1 Corinthians Paul is responding both to issues reported to him (1 Cor 1:11; cf. 1 Cor 5:1) and to the Corinthians' letter to him (1 Cor 7:1). With the formula "now concerning the matters you wrote about" in 1 Corinthians 7:1, he begins to pick up a series of items from their letter.<sup>5</sup> This formula recurs in 1 Corinthians 7:25 and then at the beginning of the extended argument of 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1.<sup>6</sup> Since the latter deals with matters of worship—pagan worship in this case—it appears that Paul moves on next to deal with three matters of worship within the believing community itself. The final one of these (1 Cor 12–14) again picks up the formula "now about" and therefore most likely emerges from their letter. But the source of the two items addressed in 1 Corinthians 11 is much less certain. They are tied together by intentionally contrasting introductions in 1 Corinthians 11:2, 17, the first as commendatory as the second is confrontational. The second matter at least has surely been reported to him.<sup>7</sup> It probably sits in its present context—between items from their letter rather than in 1 Corinthians 1–6—because of the overarching theme of "worship matters" in 1 Corinthians 8–14.

The placement of this section in the letter is thus easily explained. It too takes up a matter of worship; at the same time, it is not a problem of such serious consequence as is the potential destruction of the community when the rich

<sup>5</sup> Translations of 1 Corinthians in this chapter are my own.

<sup>6</sup> In some of these instances he is clearly quoting from their letter itself (1 Cor 7:1; 8:1, 4); see Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 275–77, 362.

<sup>7</sup> This is indicated both by the clear "I hear" statement in 1 Cor 11:18 and the confrontational nature of the whole.

abuse the poor at the Lord’s Table (see [1 Cor 11:20–22](#)). Most likely the present issue ([1 Cor 11:2–16](#)) has been reported to Paul as well; and although he feels strongly enough about it to speak to it, his repeated, basically cultural appeals make it clear that even though the Corinthian believers are not being commended with respect to the head-covering issue, neither are they being scolded as they were in [1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21; 5:1–13; 6:1–11, 12–20; 8:1–10:22](#) and will be in [1 Corinthians 11:17–34; 14:36–38](#).<sup>8</sup> Thus, the passage serves as a useful, contrasting lead-in to the major issue to be taken up next.

But what exactly is the issue in our text? Here there is a division of the house—in four ways: (1) whether both men and women were involved in the behavior Paul seeks to correct; (2) what exactly the women were doing, whether they were discarding an (assumed) external head covering or simply letting down their hair in this semipublic setting; (3) whether the covering was always to be in place or only when they prayed or prophesied (no clear decision can be made here, but at least it included the latter); and (4) whether the men and women involved were (only) husbands and wives or all women in relation to all men (it is usually assumed that Paul is dealing with husband-wife relationships because of [1 Corinthians 11:3–4](#), but in fact everything that is said could be addressed generically to all women in relationship to all men).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Although there are theological and biblical moments expressed in [1 Cor 11:3](#) and [1 Cor 11:7–9](#), all the rest is based on “shame” ([1 Cor 11:5–6](#)), what is “fitting/proper” ([1 Cor 11:13](#)), “nature” ([1 Cor 11:14](#)), and “custom” ([1 Cor 11:16](#)), none of which is implied as bringing shame on Christ!

<sup>9</sup> Concerning (1), it is sometimes argued (most recently by Collins and Thiselton) that the issue is with the behavior of both. While the passage most certainly has to do with both, in terms of relationships within the community, the structure of the three parts to the argument ([1 Cor 11:3–6, 7–12, 13–15](#)) makes a double-sided behavioral issue highly improbable. In the first two cases Paul starts with the man but shows interest primarily in

In any case, even though much of this discussion is fraught with uncertainty regarding details, determining the precise nature of the presenting problem does not seem to be absolutely essential to an understanding of Paul's argumentation as a whole, nor will it greatly affect how one views the relational issues involved—except at one crucial point, which will be taken up at the end: *Why* were they doing whatever they were doing, so that Paul addresses the issue in terms of male-female *relationships*?

## PAUL'S RESPONSE: AN OVERVIEW

The place to begin one's discussion of any of the details is to have some sense of how Paul's argument works and how its various parts relate to one another. Thus, after the commendation in [1 Corinthians 11:2](#), Paul sets out to correct a matter regarding appropriate head apparel/appearance, which, even though not especially disturbing to him, apparently still had the potential of causing a measure of distress within the community.

The complexity of the argument begins with [1 Corinthians 11:3](#), where Paul anticipates what he will say about their heads *literally*, by using “head” (Greek *kephalē*) *metaphorically* with regard to three sets of relationships: “Christ” and “every man,” “man” and “woman,” and “Christ” and “God.” Although the meaning of this metaphor is hotly debated, the concern here is to point out how this statement works in the argument itself. For the very next thing Paul says in [1](#)

the woman (note esp. the “therefore” regarding the woman in [1 Cor 11:10](#)), while in the final section he starts with, and deals mostly with, the woman (the man is mentioned in [1 Cor 1:14](#) merely to serve as a contrast to the woman in [1 Cor 11:15](#)).

Concerning (2), see the helpful summary discussions in Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians, 823–26, 828–33*. Although most scholars continue to believe that it involves some kind of external head covering on the women, deciding this issue is ultimately irrelevant for our present purpose.

[Corinthians 11:4](#) picks up the first set of relationships in [1 Corinthians 11:3](#): “every man praying or prophesying ‘having down the head’ brings shame to [*kataischynei*] his ‘head.’” This seems to refer at least to bringing shame on his metaphorical “head” (Christ) in [1 Corinthians 11:3](#).<sup>10</sup>

A similar thing is then said about the woman, that if she does the opposite of the man (“prays or prophesies *uncovered* as to the head”), she brings shame to her head. But in her case Paul elaborates on the theme of shame. An uncovered head when prophesying is equal to her being “shaved” or “shorn”; and if these are shameful—and the supposition is that they are indeed—then let her be covered.<sup>11</sup> The unexpected turn in the argument is that the shame is now her own, with no mention of the relationship to the man.<sup>12</sup> The upshot is that the meaning of the crucial phrase in [1 Corinthians 11:5](#) (“shame on her head”) now seems to be a toss-up: is “her head” “the man” of [1 Corinthians 11:3–4](#) or her own head? The most likely resolution lies in a form of double entendre; that is, by shaming her *own* head in this way, she also brings shame on “her head = man” in some way.

The next two parts of the argument seem intended to elaborate on the man-woman relationship. The first ([1 Cor 11:7–12](#)) is full of intrigue. The structure of

<sup>10</sup> Those who see the problem as having to do with the behavior of both men and women also argue that the head referred to in this instance is first of all the man’s own head (see, e.g., Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 827–28); but this seems to put [1 Cor 11:3](#) on the back burner altogether.

<sup>11</sup> Although one cannot be sure precisely why being shaved or shorn would be shameful. There is some evidence for the use of verbs to refer to a woman who wanted to appear “mannish.” See Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 511n81. An older view, which has no support from the literature, suggested that “shorn” women were prostitutes.

<sup>12</sup> The Greek text makes the woman’s shame being her own quite clear: *ei de aischron gynaiki*, “if it is shameful to/for a woman to ...”

the argument and the reason for it are clear enough, while the content and intent of the two key sentences ([1 Cor 11:7](#), [10](#)) are filled with mystery. Paul begins with the man, initially simply repeating the point of [1 Corinthians 11:4](#): “A man ought not to cover his head.”<sup>13</sup> This is then qualified by a participial phrase that seems to require a causal or explanatory sense: “since he is the image and glory of God.” But here there are further difficulties.

That Paul is appealing to [Genesis 1–2](#) can scarcely be doubted, especially in light of the double explanation given in [1 Corinthians 11:8–9](#): that woman is “from the man” and was “created for his sake.” But because Paul is alluding to the Genesis creation narrative, he does two things. First, he abandons the relationship expressed in [1 Corinthians 11:3](#) for the one narrated in [Genesis 1–2](#) (that is, between man and God, not man and Christ), thereby suggesting that the relationships expressed in [1 Corinthians 11:3](#) probably do not control the whole passage. At the same time, he restates the nature of the relationship between man and woman in terms of her being his “glory.”<sup>14</sup> His point seems to be that she who was created to be man’s glory is behaving in a way that is causing shame. With this turn in the argument the metaphorical use of *head* now disappears altogether—at least in terms of actual usage.

<sup>13</sup> These are two sentences ([1 Cor 11:4](#), [7](#)) that have led some to see the problem as dealing as much with the man as the woman. But in fact, things are not equal. Paul offers no elaboration to these sentences, nor does he make a further point of them. Indeed, in the present instance ([1 Cor 11:7](#)) he concludes by saying something about the woman’s relationship to the man, and that is what is elaborated in the rest of the section.

<sup>14</sup> After all, the Old Testament narrative is clear that man and woman together were created in God’s image, which is why Paul adds the phrase not found in Genesis that man, who is indeed “in the image of God,” is at the same time “God’s glory,” a phrase that Paul will pick up in [2 Cor 4:4–6](#) to refer to Christ in his humanity as being in both the image and glory of God.

The real puzzle comes with [1 Corinthians 11:10](#). The “for this reason” with which the new sentence begins probably picks up what is said about the man-woman relationship in [1 Corinthians 11:7–9](#).<sup>15</sup> But after that there is neither what is expected, given the way the argument has unfolded to this point, nor what is in any way clear. What is expected, in light of the argument of [1 Corinthians 11:4–5](#) and to correspond fully with [1 Corinthians 11:7](#), is “Therefore the woman ought to have her head covered.” What is present instead is the most obscure clause in the whole passage: “[She] ought to have authority over her head because of the angels.” This sentence in turn is followed by an adversative “nonetheless” (or “in any case”), which introduces two sentences intended (at least) to modify in reverse order the relational statements based on creation in [1 Corinthians 11:8–9](#), while at the same time also modifying [1 Corinthians 11:10](#) in some way.<sup>16</sup>

As the woman was created for the man’s sake ([1 Cor 11:9](#)), so now “in the Lord” neither is to live without the other ([1 Cor 11:11](#)); and as the woman originally came from the man ([1 Cor 11:8](#)), the man subsequently is born “through the woman,” so “all things come from God” ([1 Cor 11:12](#)).

The final section ([1 Cor 11:13–15](#)) appeals only to what is “fitting” and to “nature itself.” In another very complex set of sentences, Paul urges that the very fact that “nature” has given a man short hair and a woman long hair argues for

<sup>15</sup> I say probably because this inferential conjunction (*dia touto*) functions in Paul’s letters either backward or forward, or, in many cases, as is most likely the case here, simultaneously in both directions.

<sup>16</sup> “Nonetheless” is Greek *plēn*, a “marker of someth[ing] that is contrastingly added for consideration” ([BDAG](#)). It seems highly probable that it has a double function: to limit the degree of “authority over her head” that a woman possesses (if that is in fact the meaning of this verse—see below) and to sharply qualify [1 Cor 11:8–9](#) so that they will *not* be understood in the subordinating fashion that so many are prone to read into them.

her need to keep with the traditional covering.<sup>17</sup> Then the whole is wrapped up in 1 Corinthians 11:16 with a final appeal: “Anyone who might appear to be contentious” over this matter should acknowledge that “we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.”<sup>18</sup> In this way Paul appeals to what is true of his own churches as well as of the church universal.

In the end, it is plain that Paul wants the woman to maintain the tradition (whatever it is) and to do so primarily for reasons of “shame” and “honor” in a culture where this is the primary sociological value.<sup>19</sup> He is prepared to base this argument also on some basic matters regarding the relationship between men and women that goes back to creation, but he is equally prepared to qualify the latter by appealing to what it means for both to be “in the Lord” and to the fact that subsequent to creation the “order of creation” is reversed. But that still leaves us with several unresolved matters, which the rest of this essay speaks to.

<sup>17</sup> This is too easy an answer to a very complex issue, offering a conclusion without argumentation; but settling this exegetical issue is not crucial for the purposes of this paper and is a rat’s nest for people on all sides of the sociocultural issue (for a fuller argument, see Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 526–29).

“Nature” means, as the NIV rightly has it, “the very nature of things.” After all, nature in the case of the man comes about by an *unnatural* act, namely a haircut.

<sup>18</sup> The Greek adjective *toiautēn* means “of such a kind, such as this” (BDAG); to stretch it, as most English translations tend to do, to equal *allos*, “other,” is to make it conform to what one thinks Paul ought to have said. Most likely he is referring back to what the women are doing, as indicated in 1 Cor 11:5, 13. That is, the churches have no such custom as the women are promoting by their behavior—although earlier commentators thought the custom referred to was to be contentious itself (so also Collins, *First Corinthians*, 414).

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 23–93, and the literature cited in his notes.

It is of interest to note that the metaphorical use of *head* in 1 Corinthians 11:3 simply disappears from the argument after 1 Corinthians 11:5. And while the relational dimension of the argument regarding men and women continues through 1 Corinthians 11:7–12, it is not found at all at the end, nor is it picked up in any way at the conclusion.

## ON WOMEN PRAYING AND PROPHESYING

Despite an occasional demurral, the text is quite clear that women were regular participants in the “praying and prophesying” that were part of the worship in churches under Paul’s oversight.<sup>20</sup> This is fully in keeping with what comes later in 1 Corinthians 14, where Paul variously says that “*all* speak in tongues” (1 Cor 14:23), that “*all* may prophesy, one by one” (1 Cor 14:29), and that when they assemble, “*each one* of you has [some participatory role]” (1 Cor 14:26). No distinction is made between men and women in these matters, and the present text makes it certain that the *all* means what it is expected it to mean: that women and men alike participated in verbalized expressions of worship in the early house churches.

It is also likely that the present passage anticipates the argument of 1 Corinthians 14 in yet another way: in the distinction Paul will make there between “speaking in tongues” and “prophesying.” What is certain in 1 Corinthians 14 is that Paul is trying to cool the Corinthians’ ardor for tongues. To do this he sets it in a context of edification in the gathered assembly. Thus, he argues, first, that only intelligible utterances can edify the community (1 Cor 14:1–19) or bear witness to outsiders (1 Cor 14:20–25), and second, that everything must be orderly, since God is a God of shalom, not chaos (1 Cor 14:26–33). In the process he clearly denominates “tongues speaking” a form of prayer (1 Cor 14:2, 14, 28), while “prophecy” represents all forms of Spirit-

<sup>20</sup> See Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 497n22.

inspired intelligible speech, capable of edifying the whole community ([1 Cor 14:6](#)). Thus *tongues* equals speech that is God-directed (prayer), and *prophecy* equals speech that is community-directed.

In light of this later distinction, it seems altogether likely that Paul intends “praying and prophesying” to be not exclusive of other forms of ministry but representative of ministry in general. And since *prophets* precedes *teachers* in the ranking in [1 Corinthians 12:28](#), and prophesying is grouped with teaching, revelation, and knowledge in [1 Corinthians 14:6](#), one may legitimately assume that women and men together shared in all these expressions of Spirit gifting, including teaching, in the gathered assembly.<sup>21</sup>

## THE PROBABLE MEANING OF “HEAD” AS A METAPHOR

**Kephalē in 1 Corinthians 11:3.** Paul’s metaphorical use of “head” in [1 Corinthians 11:3](#) has set off an unfortunate, but massive, debate that has often produced as much heat as light.<sup>22</sup> Without rehashing that debate, we may safely isolate several things about Paul’s usage here.

1. This is both the first occurrence of *kephalē* in Paul’s writings and its only appearance in a context where “the body” is not mentioned or assumed. Later when Paul speaks of Christ as head in relationship to the church ([Eph 4:15–16](#); [Col 2:19](#)), it is a metaphor not for lordship but for the supporting, life-giving role that in ancient Greek thought the (literal) head was understood to have in relationship to the physical body.
2. In this passage it is not Christ’s relationship to the church that is in view but specifically his relationship to the man (= male human being). And whatever the relationship of Christ to the man envisioned by the metaphor

<sup>21</sup> See Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, [144–46](#).

<sup>22</sup> See the especially helpful overview, with bibliography, in Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [812–22](#).

in this context, it must be viewed in a way that is similar to Paul's understanding of the relationship of God the Father to Christ. That is, it is highly unlikely that Paul has set up the whole argument with a relational metaphor that would change meaning from pair to pair. So at issue, finally, in this whole passage is the nature of the relationship perceived between God and Christ.<sup>23</sup>

3. What we also know from the evidence is that when the Jewish community used this metaphor, as they did frequently in the Old Testament, it most often referred to a leader or clan chieftain. On the other hand, although something close to this sense can be found among Greeks, they had a broader range of uses, all of which can be shown to arise out of their anatomical understanding of the relationship of the head to the body (its most prominent or important part; the source of the body's working systems, etc.).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> It should perhaps be noted that John Chrysostom, who assumed the metaphor in the case of man and woman to express a hierarchical relationship based on the fall, felt compelled to argue against the “heretics” (Arians) that of necessity it had to have a different sense in the God-Christ pair (*Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, Homily 26 on 1 Cor 11:2–16). But in either case, he utterly rejects that the metaphor includes the notion of “rule and subjection”; otherwise Paul would “not have brought forward the instance of a wife, but rather of a slave and master.” With regard to Christ and man, and God and Christ, he resorts to the language “authors of their being.” His reason for abandoning that meaning for the man-woman relationship (which he understands as husband-wife) is that he imports here his understanding of Eph 5:22 as supporting a hierarchical relationship.

<sup>24</sup> Thus Chrysostom, with regard to the two pairs Christ-man and God-Christ, understands the metaphor in a very anatomical way: “the head is of like passions with the body, and liable to the same things.”

4. The earliest extant consistent interpretation of the metaphor in this passage is to be found in a younger contemporary of Chrysostom, [Cyril of Alexandria](#) (d. 444?), who explicitly interprets in terms of the Greek metaphor: “Thus we can say that ‘the head of every man is Christ.’ For he was made by [dia] him … as God; ‘but the head of the woman is the man,’ because she was taken out of his flesh.... Likewise, ‘the head of Christ is

On *kephalē*, note, e.g., Thiselton’s caption for his excursus “*Kephalē* and Its Multiple Meanings” (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 812). There is no known instance where *kephalē* is used as a metaphor for the husband-and-wife relationship; this seems to be unique to Paul. The closest thing to metaphorical *kephalē* = “lord over” is found in Aristotle (*Politics* 1255b): “The rule of the household is a monarchy; for every house is under one head.” But here *head* does not mean “male human being,” since Aristotle’s observations would apply, e.g., to Lydia ([Acts 16:15](#)) and Nympha ([Col 4:15](#)), as well as to Philemon ([Philem 1](#)). There is a similar usage (apparently) in Plutarch (*Pelopidas* 2.1; *Galba* 4.3), in both cases to refer to a general and his troops. But in the second instance, one of the rare instances where *head* and *body* occur together, he refers to the army as “a vigorous body [= the Gallic provinces with 100,000 men in arms] in need of a head.” While this certainly refers to their need of a commander, the metaphor in this case seems more to call for someone with brains to lead them.

The clearest evidence for the real differences between the Jewish and Greek metaphorical uses is to be found in the Septuagint (LXX). In the hundreds of places where the Hebrew *rōsh* is used for the literal head on a body, the translators invariably used the only word in Greek that means the same thing, *kephalē*. But in the approximately 180 times it appears as a metaphor for leader or chieftain, they almost always eliminate the metaphor altogether and translate it *archē* (leader), which is evidence that they were uncomfortable with (unfamiliar with?) the Jewish metaphor and simply translated it out. The few instances (six in all) where they do not do this ([Judg 11:11](#); [2 Sam 22:44](#); [Ps 18:43](#); [Is 7:8–9](#); [Lam 1:5](#)) are simply the exceptions that prove the rule.

God,’ because he is of him [*ex autou*] by nature.”<sup>25</sup> That is, as with Chrysostom’s understanding of the two pairs (God-Christ, Christ-man), Cyril is ready to go this way with all three pairs because of what is said in [1 Corinthians 11:8](#): that the woman was created from the man. Not only was the idea that the head is the source of supply and support for all the body’s systems a natural metaphor in the Greek world, but in this case, it also supported Cyril’s christological concern (not to have Christ “under” God in a hierarchy), just as it did for Chrysostom.

The question for us, then, is whether Paul was speaking out of his Jewish heritage or whether in speaking into the Corinthians’ Greek setting he used a metaphor that would have been more familiar to them.<sup>26</sup> At issue, of course, is what kind of relationship between the man and the woman is envisaged in [1 Corinthians 11:3](#) and how this plays out in the discussion that follows. For several reasons, it seems most likely that something very much like Cyril’s understanding was in Paul’s mind.

1. Despite repeated assertions to the contrary, nothing that is said following this verse hints at an authority-subordination relationship. Most often those who advocate this view have either a husband-wife or a “church order” relationship in view. But the latter is to read something into the text that simply is not there, and while it is possible that the former may be intended, nothing inherent in the discussion that follows requires such a view. The final wrap-up in [1 Corinthians 11:13–15](#) is about men and women in general and therefore offers no further help for understanding the metaphor.

<sup>25</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Ad Arcadiam et Marinam* 5.6.

<sup>26</sup> And, of course, one cannot appeal to the Old Testament usage as a place of familiarity for them, since they would not know Hebrew and their Greek Bible already had the metaphorical usage basically translated out.

2. In the one instance in our passage where Paul might be picking up some dimension of the metaphor ([1 Cor 11:8–9](#)), the relationship envisaged is clearly not one of subordination to the man as “leader.” Paul is setting out to explain his assertion that “the woman is the *glory* of man.” The answer lies in the Genesis narrative: she came from man (in the sense that she was taken from his side) and was created for his sake; this is what makes her the man’s glory. If this is an extension of the metaphor in [1 Corinthians 11:3](#), then it clearly points to “man” as metaphorical head in the sense Cyril maintains. Moreover, there is no usage of *glory* anywhere in Scripture that would suggest that Paul is here advocating a subordinating relationship by means of this word.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, in a context where women are bringing shame on themselves and thus on their husbands, this appeal makes perfectly good sense. She who is to be his glory is behaving in a way that turns that glory into shame.
3. One of the ongoing puzzles for all interpreters is why Paul should include the third member in his opening sentence, since “God as the head of Christ” is not picked up again in any way. Most likely this is because the saying had prior existence and Paul is simply appealing to it. But if so, what was its point? Although one cannot be certain here, most likely it was a useful

<sup>27</sup> See Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [571](#): “Paul is really reflecting the sense of the Old Testament text to which he is alluding. Man, by himself, is not complete; he is alone, without a companion or helper suitable to him. The animals will not do; he needs one who is bone of his bone, one who is like him but different from him, one who is uniquely his own ‘glory.’ In fact, when the man in the Old Testament narrative sees the woman he ‘glories’ in her by bursting into song.... She is not thereby subordinate to him, but necessary for him. She exists to his honor as the one who having come from man is the one companion suitable to him, so that he might be complete and that together they might form humanity.”

metaphor to express something of a chronology of salvation history. According to [1 Corinthians 8:6](#), all things (including Adam) were created “through Christ”; the man then became the “source” of the woman’s being, while God was the “source” of Christ’s incarnation. In any case, this view of the saying can make sense of all three members, in a way that seeing the metaphor as expressing subordination does not seem to—unless one wants to embrace a heterodox [Christology](#).<sup>28</sup>

**Kephalē Elsewhere in Paul.** Nonetheless, it is common to appeal to Paul’s later use of this metaphor in Colossians and Ephesians, as Chrysostom did, and then to import here a hierarchical meaning from there.<sup>29</sup> But much confusion seems to be at work here, since in these two later (companion) letters the metaphor is used in three distinct ways: to point to (1) Christ’s relationship with the church ([Eph 4:15–16; 5:23](#); [Col 1:18; 2:19](#)), (2) Christ’s relationship to the powers ([Eph 1:22](#); [Col 2:10](#)), and (3) a householder’s relationship to his wife ([Eph](#)

<sup>28</sup> See the chapter by [Kevin Giles](#) in this volume.

<sup>29</sup> One of the problems with much of the debate regarding the metaphorical use of *kephalē* in Paul is the tacit assumption that the resolution lies in deciding once and for all what the metaphor meant in Greek sources outside the New Testament. This seems especially evident in the debate between Wayne Grudem and Richard Cervin, carried on first in the *Trinity Journal* (Grudem, vol. 6 [1985]: [38–59](#); Cervin, vol. 10 [1989]: [85–112](#); Grudem, vol. 11 [1990]: [3–72](#)) and in a final rejoinder by Cervin that was distributed as an unpublished paper (ca. 1991) by CBE International. But what Cervin has especially demonstrated in his survey of the literature is the diversity of options to be found there—even though he wants finally to narrow it to a primary meaning of “prominent” or “topmost.” The problem with this narrowing of things is that while there can be no question that Christ as head of the church is the most prominent part of the body, this can hardly be Paul’s point. Rather, Paul’s meaning is the Greek anatomical one, that the body is sustained by its relationship to its most prominent part.

5:23).<sup>30</sup>

The imagery in its first instance ([Col 1:18; 2:19](#)) seems to stem ultimately from Paul's view of the church as the body of Christ, celebrated at every Lord's Supper according to [1 Corinthians 10:16–17; 11:29](#). What is at issue in Colossians are some people who are moving in clearly heretical directions, who are “not holding fast to the head” ([Col 2:19](#)) but are cutting themselves off from the body altogether and, by implication, being “joined” to the “powers” to whom they now give undue significance. This concern is anticipated in the earlier occurrence of the metaphor in [Colossians 1:18](#), where it appears in a clause that serves as the janus between the two stanzas of the hymn in [Colossians 1:15–20](#): “And he [the Son of God] is the head of the body, the church.”<sup>31</sup> This otherwise

<sup>30</sup> I use the term *householder* here because the entire passage in Ephesians ([Eph 5:21–6:9](#)) assumes the Greco-Roman villa, not relationships within other settings. After all, Colossians (a companion letter to Ephesians) was written at the same time as Philemon and assumes the reading of both letters in the context of that household. For example, if there were a married slave couple in the household, Philemon would be the head of the slave wife in the same way he would be of Apphia. Paul’s point in using the metaphor in Ephesians is that the householder is the savior of his wife, in the sense of being the one on whom the entire household is dependent for their well-being. See further Gordon D. Fee, “[The Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:18–6:9](#),” *PriscPap* 16 (Winter 2002): 3–8.

<sup>31</sup> I say “janus” here because this clause is otherwise unrelated to the content of the first stanza ([Col 1:15–17](#)), where the emphasis is on the Son as the firstborn over the whole created order; in him all things, including the powers, were created; indeed, they were created by him and for him; and in him all things hold together. The balancing second stanza begins in the second part of [Col 1:18](#)—“he [the Son] is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead”—and moves on to speak of his redemptive work that makes him so. The beginning of [Col 1:18](#), “the Son is the head of the body, the church,” joins these two stanzas. Thus, with Paul’s later use of this metaphor, the church is dependent on its life-

unnecessary insertion into the hymn/poem of [Colossians 1:15–20](#) seems clearly intended—as does the whole hymn/poem itself—to set the stage for some things that will be said later about Christ’s relationship both to the powers and to the church in the main argument of [Colossians 2:6–19](#).

First, Paul claims that Christ is “head of [= over] every power and authority” ([Col 2:10](#)) and is so, he adds in [Ephesians 1:22](#), *for the sake of* the church. These two instances are in fact the only certain places where Paul uses the imagery in this more specifically Jewish way. Although he will go on to speak of Christ as head of the body, here the metaphor stands alone without connection to a body and clearly refers to Christ’s authority over all the powers. Thus, Paul appears in this usage to be making a play on the metaphorical options. Christ is “head over the powers”—whom he has conquered through his death, resurrection, and ascension.

Second, when the imagery is used in relationship to the church, the key to its intended meaning is the elaboration in [Colossians 2:19](#), where the false teachers have lost connection with the head. This is obviously not a metaphor for subordination or lordship but for the maintenance of life, as the rest of the sentence makes plain. To lose connection with the head means to lose life itself, since the church functions as Christ’s body only as it maintains connection with the head. This is also how the head-body imagery is elaborated in [Ephesians 4:15–16](#). Now in a positive context, the imagery encourages the life and growth of the church as a unity, which is why in Colossians those who cease to “hold fast” to the head cease to live—and in fact are moving the church itself toward death.

This relationship between head and body seems also to be the point of the analogical use of the metaphor in [Ephesians 5:22–24](#).<sup>32</sup> Precisely because Paul is

giving, life-sustaining “head” ([Col 2:19](#)); at the same time Christ is head over “the powers” ([Col 2:10](#)).

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deliberately using an analogy, not offering a literal description of reality, the point of the analogy takes us back to [Ephesians 4:15–16](#), *not* to the relationship of Christ to “the powers.”<sup>33</sup> And this point is the apt one: just as the church is totally dependent on Christ for life and growth, so the wife in the first-century household was totally dependent on her husband as her “savior,” in the sense of being dependent on him for her life in the world.

In view of all this, the importation into [1 Corinthians](#) of *any* of Paul’s later uses of the imagery is probably suspect at best. That is, Paul surely does not intend here that the first member of each pair is “head over” the other in the same sense in which Paul asserts that Christ is “head over the powers,” having disarmed and triumphed over them ([Col 2:10, 15](#)). Moreover, since there is no head-body relationship expressed in our passage, neither does it seem appropriate to think of the second member as “sustained and built up by” its relationship to the first (as in [Eph 4:15–16; 5:22–33; Col 2:19](#)). That leaves us, then, with Cyril’s view—the first member as the source/ground of the other’s being—as the most likely meaning here. This, after all, is the one relationship actually spelled out in our passage (the woman coming from the man, [1 Cor 11:8](#); the man now coming from the woman, [1 Cor 11:12](#)).

## THE MEANING OF [1 CORINTHIANS 11:10](#)

<sup>32</sup> It should be pointed out that the metaphor is *not* used for the other two relationships with the householder (children and slaves), where lordship is plainly expressed. The change of verbs from *hypotassō* (where the middle suggests a form of volunteerism that is expected of all, but in a special way of wives) to *hypakouō* for children and slaves (in both [Colossians](#) and [Ephesians](#)) suggests that Paul simply would never have used the latter for wives and that there is therefore a basic difference between them, despite occasional semantic overlap.

<sup>33</sup> That is, the husband is *not* the savior of his wife in the same way as Christ is of the church.

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**First Corinthians 11:10** is the most puzzling sentence in the entire passage—for three reasons: (1) what is said is not what is expected on the basis of **1 Corinthians 11:7**, (2) the sudden use of the word *authority* in relation to the woman’s head is both unexpected and seemingly unrelated to anything that has been said heretofore, and (3) the second reason offered, “because of the angels,” is shrouded in obscurity.

1. The unexpected nature of this sentence is in part due to what is actually said; but in part it is also due to the way it begins, “for this reason.” If the connector in this case points both backward and forward, then the forward look would probably be anticipating the phrase “because of the angels”; thus, “for this reason, namely, because of the angels.” But a backward look is more likely the primary intent. If so, then even though it would embrace the content of **1 Corinthians 11:8–9**, Paul most likely intends to draw an inference from the end of **1 Corinthians 11:7**: “but the woman is the glory of man.” This, after all, is what **1 Corinthians 11:8–9** are setting out to justify. But it is this very reality that makes the *content* of **1 Corinthians 11:10** so puzzling, since not a single word that follows has any immediately apparent relationship to what has been said up to this point.
2. The most puzzling moment in the entire passage is Paul’s use of the word *exousia* (“authority/right to act”) at the very place where **1 Corinthians 11:7** has set us up the expectation of “ought to have *her head covered*.” For this reason the church has historically assumed, and many continue to assert, that what Paul does write should in fact be understood as standing in for what we are led to expect. But this historic position is full of difficulties, bluntly expressed a century ago by Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer: “The difficulty is to see why Paul has expressed himself in this extraordinary manner. That ‘authority’ (*exousia*) has been put for ‘sign of authority’ is not difficult; but why does St Paul say ‘authority’ when he means ‘subjection?’”<sup>34</sup> Precisely! But the problems are far more substantial

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than his simply saying one thing when he meant another.

First, the only way one can come to this view is by a particular reading of the context. If we were to come across this sentence in a free-standing setting, no one would interpret it in this passive sense. This construction (subject, the verb *echein* [“has/have”], with *exousia* as the object followed by the preposition *epi*) would be read in the only way it is known to occur in the language: the subject has the authority “over” the object of the preposition. This does not mean that in context a passive sense could not occur; but in fact, such an occurrence is otherwise unknown.

Second, this is simply not a case of one word’s standing for another. Because a passive relationship of the subject (woman) to the object (*exousia*) is required, one must make two jumps to get to the assumed meaning (as Robertson and Plummer clearly recognized). That is, the word *exousia* would stand in for the covering itself (a “veil”—so some early versions and English translations), which in turn stands in for a “sign of” the authority a man presumably has over her (see NRSV, NEB). But this double jump is not easy to come to from a straight reading of the text.

Third, the word *exousia* has already occurred several times in 1 Corinthians, most of them in the immediately preceding argument, where it is used in a strictly pejorative way. It emerges first in 1 Corinthians 8:9 (surprisingly, but absolutely straightforwardly), where Paul warns that those who are acting on the basis of “this *exousia* of yours” are thereby putting a stumbling block in the way of others. The word is then picked up again in the extended defense of Paul’s apostolic

<sup>34</sup> Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914), 232.

“rights” to the Corinthians’ material support ([1 Cor 9:1–23](#)), where the context indicates that they are rejecting his apostleship precisely because he does not make use of his rightful *exousia* (see [2 Cor 12:13](#)). He argues in defense (see [1 Cor 9:1–3](#)) that he has the *exousia*, all right, but has freely curtailed it ([1 Cor 9:12–19](#)) for the sake of the gospel (“so that by all possible means I might save some,” [1 Cor 9:22](#)). His ultimate point is that the Corinthians themselves should act accordingly. It is precisely this faulty/arrogant use of their *exousia* that is the cause of the warnings in [1 Corinthians 10:1–13](#). Given this immediate context to our passage, it would seem likely that this is also how we should understand the present sentence in context: that the women do indeed have *exousia*, but at issue again is the use they would make of it.

3. The equally puzzling “because of the angels” has been the bane of all interpreters, and any number of suggestions have been brought forward.<sup>35</sup> A good case can be made for at least starting with the evidence from [1 Corinthians](#) itself, where, besides this passage, angels are mentioned three other times ([1 Cor 4:9; 6:2–3; 13:1](#)). There is good reason to believe that the Corinthians understood speaking in tongues to be speaking the language of the angels ([1 Cor 13:1](#)) and thus to be evidence of a superior spirituality.<sup>36</sup> If so, then the earlier two occurrences make sense in terms of Paul’s trying to help the Corinthians gain perspective on this matter: he designates the angels as witnesses to his apostolic weaknesses ([1 Cor 4:9](#)), and he asserts that the Corinthians themselves will be involved in the eschatological

<sup>35</sup> For example, that the angels were understood to be the guardians (or overseers or assistants) of Christian worship and would be offended by impropriety, or that the angels would lust after women who were uncovered. See further Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [521–22](#); Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [839–41](#).

<sup>36</sup> See the discussion in Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [630–31](#).

judgment of angels ([1 Cor 6:2–3](#)). In keeping with this suggestion, “because of the angels” in this passage may thus reflect the Corinthians’ own positive view of being like the angels.

Within this scenario, this sentence could be yet another instance in the letter where Paul is reflecting their own point of view—in this case, of some Corinthian women.<sup>37</sup> As elsewhere, Paul would be agreeing with them in principle, but then he sets out qualifications so that his agreement ends up being in principle only. If this is the case, then Paul is here momentarily allowing the rightness of the Corinthian women’s perspective: that because of their “angelic” status they have the right to put what they please (or not) on their own heads.

But this also means the *plēn* (“nevertheless”) that immediately follows is a very important qualifier. First, Paul is not backing down from what he has affirmed in [1 Corinthians 11:8–9](#) on the basis of the Genesis story, which explains how the woman is man’s glory. But neither will he allow that to be taken in a subordinating way. The first set of realities is not reversed “in the Lord,” but neither is it to be understood wrongly. At the same time, if [1 Corinthians 11:10](#) is his (ostensible) agreement with the reasons the women are discarding the normal covering, then [1 Corinthians 11:11–12](#) also functions as a rejoinder to their position. Being “in the Lord” does not mean *exousia* to be as the angels now, where distinctions between male and female are understood no longer to exist; rather, it means that in the present age neither man nor woman can exist without the other, and gender distinctions are part of the “all things [that] are from God.”

## A POSSIBLE EXPLANATION

That leads to a final suggestion as to *what* was going on in the church gatherings

<sup>37</sup> As would also be true of [1 Cor 7:1](#) (cf. [1 Cor 6:12–13](#) for the perspective of some men and [1 Cor 8:1, 4, 8](#) for the perspective of those in the know).

in Corinth and *why* some women had both abandoned the cultural norm and perhaps argued for the right to do so. The most common answer to this question, either expressed or assumed, is that it was an act of insubordination on the part of some wives toward their husbands. The problem with this answer, of course, is that nothing else in 1 Corinthians seems to support it. But by gathering up all the evidence in the letter, including what Paul says here, one may reconstruct a fairly consistent point of view that covers most of the letter.

Beginning at the end ([1 Cor 12–14](#)), there is a community that has put a considerable emphasis on speaking in tongues, and Paul's reference to "speaking the language of angels" ([1 Cor 13:1](#)) probably has direct bearing on their reasons for it.<sup>38</sup> Speaking in an angelic tongue gave these new believers, the majority of whom were not among the Corinthian elite ([1 Cor 1:26–28](#)), a new sense of status. With that also came a sense that they had begun to move in a spirituality that resembled the existence of the angels themselves. Moreover, such a viewpoint could have been attributed in part to Paul himself, since whatever else is true, he had a thoroughly eschatological view of being in Christ—that the basic moments of the future (resurrection and the outpoured Spirit) have already taken place, even though their final expression was yet to be.

If this understanding of spirituality prevailed in Corinth, and especially if some of the women were deeply into it, then one can account for several other matters in our letter, including the church's basically negative attitude toward the apostle ([1 Cor 1:10–12; 4:1–21; 9:1–19](#)). His bodily weaknesses, combined with his not using his *exousia* regarding their support, serves as evidence for the Corinthians that Paul lacks true *exousia*—the right to choose one's behavior for oneself.<sup>39</sup> But even more important, such a view can especially account for some

<sup>38</sup> See Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 630–31.

<sup>39</sup> Paul's not using his *exousia* regarding their support is such an obvious source of contention between them that he picks it up again very sarcastically in [2 Cor 11:7–9; 12:13](#).

women's (apparent) rejection of the marriage bed ([1 Cor 7:1–7](#); because they are already as the angels), so much so that they could even argue for divorce if need be ([1 Cor 7:10–16](#)). It also accounts for their (possibly) discouraging some virgins already promised in marriage from following through ([1 Cor 7:25–38](#)) and for some men's resorting to prostitutes as a result ([1 Cor 6:12–20](#)). This also explains in part the denial of a future bodily existence on the part of some ([1 Cor 15:12, 35](#)) and very likely lies behind their fascination with wisdom ([1 Cor 1–4](#)) and knowledge ([1 Cor 8–10](#)). These views are generally shared by both men and women in the community, but they especially find expression in the behavior of the women in [1 Corinthians 7; 11:2–16](#).

If this is a reasonable explanation for the women's behavior in this passage, then what lies behind it is not so much an act of insubordination as a deliberate casting aside of an external marker that distinguished women from men.<sup>40</sup> That is, the issue in Corinth is very likely a subtle movement toward androgyny, where distinctions between men and women are of little value “because of the angels”; they have already experienced a form of angelic life where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage ([Lk 20:35–36](#)).<sup>41</sup>

For Paul this is not only a betrayal of the gospel but also a denial of the “not yet” dimension of our present eschatological existence. Above all, it puts

<sup>40</sup> This at least explains the one moment of vigor in the whole argument, [1 Cor 11:5–6](#), where Paul expostulates that if they are going to remove the external marking of gender difference then they might as well go all the way and have their hair cut in a manly style. For the evidence for this meaning of these verbs, see Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 511n81.

<sup>41</sup> The significance of Luke's expression of this periscope is that Luke's Gospel most likely gave written form to the Jesus tradition as it circulated in Paul's churches, for which their common tradition of the words of institution ([1 Cor 11:24–25](#); [Lk 22:19–20](#)) serves as ample evidence.

considerable strain on present relationships between men and women. Paul begins his answer with a metaphorical appeal to one's head because the problem lies squarely on the head. In a culture where the vast majority of women are dependent on a man for life in the world, a woman who brings shame on her own head by getting rid of one of the cultural markers of distinction also brings shame on her metaphorical head, the one on whom the woman is primarily dependent and to whom she is responsible in the Greco-Roman household (which also serves as the nucleus expression of the house church that meets in the household).

While none of this is certain, it does offer a view of [1 Corinthians 11:2–16](#) that can make sense of all its parts and at the same time fits well into the larger perspective of the letter. Paul's intent, therefore, is not to put women in their place, as it were, but to maintain a cultural tradition that has the effect of serving as a gender distinctive, even while “in the Lord” neither is independent of the other ([1 Cor 11:11](#)).

# 8

## LEARNING IN THE ASSEMBLIES

### 1 CORINTHIANS 14:34–35

*Craig S. Keener*

Very few churches today take 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 to mean all that it could possibly mean. Indeed, any church that permits women to participate in congregational singing recognizes that Paul was not demanding what a face-value reading of his words seems to imply: complete silence as a sign of women's subordination. Thus, almost *everyone* has a problem with pressing this text literally, and interpreters must explain the divergence between what it states and what they believe it means. But beyond this near consensus, church traditions and interpreters diverge: Just how silent must women be?

### VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Interpretations vary considerably. Some scholars, for example, argue that Paul cites a Corinthian position here, which he then refutes, as he sometimes did earlier in the letter (e.g., 1 Cor 6:12–14). First Corinthians 14:36 does not, however, read easily like a refutation of preceding verses.<sup>1</sup> Others propose that, following synagogue practice, husbands and wives met in different parts of the church, so that women who asked questions could not avoid disrupting the worship. This proposal fails on two counts. First, synagogues were probably not

<sup>1</sup> I cite documentation for all these positions in Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 74–80; for the sake of space I omit most documentation here. See also Craig S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 117–21.

segregated in this period.<sup>2</sup> Second, although the Corinthian church started in a synagogue ([Acts 18:4](#)), it now met in homes ([Acts 18:7](#))—which would hardly afford the space for such gender segregation.

Some scholars question whether Paul even wrote the passage, noting both textual evidence and its contrast with its context and Paul’s usual teaching.<sup>3</sup> There is no question that it sounds intrusive. For example, the opening “or” of [1 Corinthians 14:36](#), in light of Paul’s usage elsewhere in [1 Corinthians](#), most naturally follows “as in all the churches of the saints” in [1 Corinthians 14:33](#) (which itself naturally reads as concluding what precedes it, as in the similar appeal of [1 Cor 11:16](#)).<sup>4</sup> The early Western textual tradition has [1 Corinthians 14:34–35](#) in a different location, which may mean that early scribes were still debating the best place in Paul’s writings to insert them. These scholars point out that such relocation in ancient texts usually suggests an interpolation and that this is the only passage in Paul’s writings where scribes changed the sequence of his argument. The earliest evidence, including from the [church fathers](#), treats [1 Corinthians 14:34–35](#) as a unit distinct from the context.

But though the passage certainly does interrupt the context, none of the

<sup>2</sup> Shemuel Safrai, “The Synagogue,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century*, 2 vols., ed. Shemuel Safrai and M. Stern (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974–1976), 939; Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 103–38.

<sup>3</sup> Argued by F. F. Bruce, Wayne Meeks, and others; but the most persuasive exponent of this position is Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 699–705; most fully, Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 272–81. In a series of articles Philip Barton Payne has also argued the likelihood that some earlier manuscripts omitted these verses, though this evidence remains disputed.

<sup>4</sup> Translations of [1 Corinthians](#) are my own.

ancient manuscripts lack these verses. That the verses do not seem to fit the context could explain why scribes struggled with where to locate them. Brief digressions were common both in Paul and other ancient writers.<sup>5</sup> It is thus possible that Paul himself inserted this brief digression into a context involving order in church meetings to address a problem with some Corinthian women's behavior, of which he had been informed.

Still, trying to fit the passage into the immediate context is not simple, as the variety of context-based interpretations suggests. Some suppose that Paul is silencing women's practice of spiritual gifts such as prophecy or prayer in tongues. While this proposal does pay attention to the context (which regulates public use of the gifts), it is difficult to square with Paul's acceptance of women's praying and prophesying in church earlier in the same letter ([1 Cor 11:5](#)).

Some readers interpret this passage as prohibiting women's teaching the Bible publicly, based on their understanding of [1 Timothy 2:11–12](#). Unfortunately, the Corinthians could not simply flip in their Bibles to 1 Timothy (which had not been written yet) to figure out what Paul meant, and unlike prophecy and tongues, teaching is not even mentioned directly in the present context. Of course, if Paul enjoins complete silence on women, that silence would necessarily preclude teaching; but it would also preclude public prophecy and prayer (contradicting Paul's earlier remarks) as well as even modern congregational singing.

One proposal that is no more persuasive, yet has gained a wide hearing, is that Paul simply prohibits women from *judging* prophecy ([1 Cor 14:29](#)).<sup>6</sup> Most of the

<sup>5</sup> See D. A. Carson, “‘Silent in the Churches’: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36,” in [RBMW](#), 193–94. For digressions, see, e.g., Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.57; *Life of Flavius Josephus* 336–67; Livy, *History of Rome* 9.17.1–9.19.17; Cicero, *Finibus* 2.32.104; *De Oratore* 43.148; *Ad Atticus* 7.2; Arrian, *Indica* 6.1; Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 5.9–13.5.

supporters of this proposal are nonegalitarians, though even if the proposal were correct, one is hard-pressed to see why restricting women from judging prophecies in Corinth would thereby restrict women from teaching (yet not prophesying or praying) then or today. Judging prophecy is a task assigned to all who prophesy ([1 Cor 14:29](#)), perhaps (given the use of the cognate term) part of the gift of discerning spirits ([1 Cor 12:10](#)); and again, women can prophesy ([1 Cor 11:5](#)). The only kind of speech specifically mentioned here (asking questions) seems little related to evaluating prophecies' accuracy.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the greatest weakness of the position is that there is nothing in the text that specifically leads us to suppose that judging prophecies is the particular sort of speech in view; if the previous proposal about limiting women's involvement in spiritual gifts fails because it contradicts [1 Corinthians 11:4–5](#), at least it was a specific *emphasis* in the preceding context (and not simply one activity among many others in the context, like evaluating prophecies in [1 Cor 14:29](#)).<sup>8</sup> What in [1 Corinthians 14:34–35](#) specifies judging prophecies? And where does the text suggest that judging prophecies reveals a higher degree of authority than prophesying God's message itself? That many nonegalitarians support this reading (rather than a more explicit argument against teaching) shows how difficult it is to target Bible

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Carson, “Silent in the Churches,” 194–97; James B. Hurley, “Did Paul Require Veils or the Silence of Women? A Consideration of [1 Cor. 11:2–16](#) and [1 Cor. 14:33b–36](#),” *WTJ* 35 (1973): 217; also, some egalitarians: Walter L. Liefeld, “Women, Submission and Ministry in [1 Corinthians](#),” in *Women, Authority and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Mickelsen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 150.

<sup>7</sup> Although people asked questions of oracles ([Oxyrhynchus Papyri 1148–49](#), 1477; Maximus of Tyre, *Orations* 8.3) or “inquired of the Lord” (e.g., [1 Sam 9:9](#)), this was not a method of *evaluating* prophecy.

<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 115, offers one of the classic warnings against the danger of interpretive overspecification.

teaching or pastoral ministry without eliminating prophecy or prayer, and ultimately suggests that this is a difficult text for all modern interpreters, including nonegalitarians.

## WHAT SITUATION WAS PAUL ADDRESSING?

When Paul named various people in the church in Corinth, he did not have to explain to his readers who these people were (e.g., [1 Cor 1:11, 14, 16; 16:17](#)). The Corinthian Christians already knew them. Likewise, he could refer to practices such as food offered to idols and women wearing head coverings with no concern that twenty-first-century readers might struggle to reconstruct the situation. After all, the verse that tells us that Paul was writing to the Corinthians ([1 Cor 1:2](#)) is just as inspired as more popular parts of the letter, and the letter genre itself invites us to consider his readers' situation.

Some readers today reject any interpretation of a passage that requires us to take the particular situation into account. Such readers are never consistent, however: few, for example, provide offerings for the Jerusalem church every Sunday ([1 Cor 16:1–4](#)). Likewise, many do not require head coverings or holy kisses ([1 Cor 11:2–16; 16:20](#)), recognizing that these practices meant something different to first-century readers from what they would mean to us today.<sup>9</sup> We cannot simply cite the present passage and claim that it applies to all situations without begging the question. In any case, the first task of the reader of Scripture is the exegetical one: understanding the text on its own terms in its

<sup>9</sup> For the cultural practices involved here, see Craig S. Keener, “[Head Coverings](#)” and “[Kissing](#),” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. C. A. Evans and S. E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), [442–47](#), [628–29](#). For further examples of the need for cultural sensitivity in interpreting these passages, see Craig S. Keener, “[Women in Ministry](#),” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), [46–49](#), [55–57](#).

own context. Only after we have understood it contextually can we apply it appropriately.

Paul can hardly mean that all women in all churches must be completely silent all the time; that would contradict Paul's earlier words in the same letter ([1 Cor 11:5](#)), not to mention his valuing of women laborers in the gospel ([Rom 16:1–7, 12](#)). As mentioned above, it would also contradict the practice of the majority of even the most conservative churches today. Since those who allow women to participate in congregational singing do not apply this text any more literally than egalitarians do, all could benefit from further discussion of the background. Tongues speakers ([1 Cor 14:30](#)) also were to remain silent, but only under particular circumstances. What clues does Paul offer us in the text itself concerning the reasons for the silence? The context addresses not simply spiritual gifts but order and propriety in house-church meetings ([1 Cor 14:27–33](#)).

Two things are absolutely central to a proper understanding of this passage. First, and most important, our verses themselves *specify only one particular kind of speech* that we can be certain Paul addresses here. Unless Paul changes the subject from women's submissive silence ([1 Cor 14:34](#)) to asking questions privately ([1 Cor 14:35a](#)) and back again to silence ([1 Cor 14:35b](#)), asking questions is at least a primary example of the sort of speech he seeks to forbid. In fact, Paul explicitly bases his injunction to ask questions privately on his demand for silence ([1 Cor 14:35](#), “for”). Second, and related to the first, Paul explicitly ties the women's speech in this case to shame. And since honor and shame are areas in which cultures differ considerably, it is worth our while to determine the source of shame in this particular instance.

Why would women have been tempted to ask questions during the service? And what problems would these interruptions have posed? Here it is helpful to note that questions were standard fare in all ancient lecture settings—except when asked by those insufficiently learned, who were expected to keep quiet, at

least so long as they remained novices. There is good reason to suppose that most of the women in the Corinthian church—even those raised in the synagogue—were insufficiently learned. Further, their gender itself would have rendered their outspokenness offensive to conservative Roman and Greek men, probably even in the familial setting of a Corinthian house church.

## **WOMEN'S SILENCE AND QUESTIONS IN PUBLIC SETTINGS**

Reading our passage on its own terms, I had always found most plausible the view that women were interrupting the service with questions.<sup>10</sup> But I never could imagine what circumstances provoked these public questions until I read Plutarch's essay *On Lectures*. Then I realized that listeners regularly interrupted lectures with questions, whether to learn more about the subject or to compete intellectually with an inadequately prepared lecturer. I quickly realized that questions were common in Jewish settings as well and were a regular part of ancient Mediterranean lecture settings in general.<sup>11</sup> House churches were undoubtedly less formal than larger settings but apparently included, when possible, a teaching element that would probably follow many practices familiar from similarly sized learning gatherings in the culture (see [1 Cor 12:28–29; 14:6, 26; Rom 12:7](#)).

But why would Paul have restricted questions coming specifically from

<sup>10</sup> Also, e.g., Don Williams, *The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church* (Glendale, CA: Gospel Light, 1977), 70; Kevin Giles, *Created Woman: A Fresh Study of the Biblical Teaching* (Canberra, Australia: Acorn, 1985), 56.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Plutarch, *Lectures* 11; *Moralia* 43B; Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 1.26.2; 8.10; 12.5.4; 16.6.1–12; 18.13.7–8; 20.10.1–6; Seneca, *Epistles to Lucilius* 108.3; t. Sanh. 7:10; Avot de Rabbi Nathan 6A; Martin Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 79; also, intellectual conversation, e.g., Polybius, *Histories* 31.23.9; Plutarch, *Table-Talk* 2.1.2; *Moralia* 630BC.

women? The questions could be an example of a broader kind of speech in the assembly prohibited to women; but then why does Paul permit the women to pray and prophesy in 1 Corinthians 11:5? Two possibilities make good sense.

The first is that ancient Mediterranean protocol would disapprove of an otherwise honorable woman addressing unrelated men.<sup>12</sup> Thus, for example, in one novel a noble woman protests that it is proper for only a man to speak when men are present, explaining that she speaks only under duress.<sup>13</sup> Speech to “their own husbands” here may thus contrast with speaking to other men—a practice Greek men permitted for “inspired” speech but rejected as shameful for casual conversation. This sort of situation could easily arise in the ambiguous boundaries between private and public spheres experienced in a house church.<sup>14</sup>

In current Western society, it is nearly impossible for anyone who engages in any activity in public—working, attending university, shopping—to avoid some casual cross-gender conversation, but this was not the case in the first century. Although many men considered women prone to gossip, social convention particularly respected women who were socially retiring and did not talk much with men outside their household.<sup>15</sup> Many men questioned women’s judgment.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 3.8.6; cf. 8.3.2. This principle is often acknowledged here; e.g., Christopher Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and Its Hellenistic Environment* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 274, 277; cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 589, 592.

<sup>13</sup> Heliodorus, *Ethiopica* 1.21–22, especially 1.22 (probably third century AD).

<sup>14</sup> See especially Terence Paige, “The Social Matrix of Women’s Speech at Corinth: The Context and Meaning of the Command to Silence in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36,” *BBR* 12 (2002): 217–42, published during the editing of this essay’s original version. Ancient literature led us to very similar conclusions independently.

<sup>15</sup> See Plutarch, *Bride* 31–32; *Moralia* 142CD; Heliodorus, *Ethiopica* 1.21. Later rabbis felt

Women who conversed with men laid themselves open to gossips' complaints about their morality.<sup>17</sup> Traditional Romans regarded wives' speaking publicly with others' husbands as horrible behavior, reflecting possible flirtatious designs and subverting the moral order of the state.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, meekness and shyness in women were considered honorable.<sup>19</sup> First-century Romans, including many in Corinth, had generally become more tolerant, but enough traditional sentiments remained to create tension in the house-church setting, especially with various cultures present. (Corinth was officially Roman in this period, but Paul's writing in Greek and presupposing Jewish customs suggests a mixed church.)

Jewish men should avoid unnecessary conversation with women ([m. Avot 1:5](#); [t. Shabb. 1:14](#); [t. Ber. 43b, bar.](#); [b. Eruv. 53b](#)), and the strictest felt that a wife who spoke with a man in the street could be divorced with no marriage settlement ([m. Ketub. 7:6](#)). Some felt that such verbal intercourse could ultimately lead to sin ([Ecclesiasticus 9:9; 42:12](#); [Testament of Reuben 6.1–2](#)). Traditional Middle Eastern societies still view social intercourse as nearly the moral equivalent of sexual infidelity. See Carol Delaney, “[Seeds of Honor, Fields of Shame](#),” in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. D. D. Gilmore (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987), 43.

<sup>16</sup> See [Cicero, Pro Murena 12.27](#); [Philo, Qui Omnis Probus Liber Sit 117](#); [Hypothetica 11.14–17](#); [Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 1.49; 4.219](#); Craig S. Keener, “Marriage,” in Evans and Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 688.

<sup>17</sup> Theophrastus, *Characters* 28.3—also if they (rather than a husband or porter) answer the door (this suggests they have a paramour; see [Tibullus, 1.2.7, 15–24, 41, 55–56](#)).

<sup>18</sup> Livy, *History of Rome* 34.2.9; 34.4.18. A more progressive speaker argues that this behavior is acceptable under some circumstances ([34.5.7–10](#)).

<sup>19</sup> E.g., [Sophocles, Ajax 293](#); [Demosthenes, Against Meidias 79](#); [Valerius Maximus, Memorable Doings and Sayings 7.1.1](#); [Ecclesiasticus 22:5; 26:14](#); see further Keener, “Marriage,” 687–90.

Because women's public speech was sometimes shameful in Corinth, one cannot simply assume that Paul's claim that it is shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly ([1 Cor 14:35](#)) is meant to be transcultural, any more than his earlier injunction to cover their heads (related to shame in [1 Cor 11:5–6](#)) or his later one to greet with a holy kiss.<sup>20</sup> When applied to gender relations, "shameful" often involved a woman's reputation in sexual matters.<sup>21</sup> Conservative Greek culture, for example, regarded a wife's talking with a young man as "shameful" (the same Greek term).<sup>22</sup> While Paul challenges some social conventions of his day, he supports others (including gender-related conventions such as head coverings). Presumably he often does this for strategic reasons

<sup>20</sup> Liefeld finds here the idea of glory and disgrace, as in [1 Cor 11:7](#), related to decorum or "order" (cf. [1 Cor 12:23; 11:34; 14:40](#)); he rightly notes that unnecessary social criticism could hinder the spread of Christianity ("Women, Submission and Ministry," 140–42). Speaking was "shameful" when inappropriate (e.g., in the case of a shameful speaker; *Aeschines, Timarchus* 28–29).

<sup>21</sup> The designation *shameful* often applied to sexual immorality (e.g., *Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities* 1.78.5; *Diodorus Siculus, Library of History* 5.55.6–7; 10.31.1; 12.15.2; 12.21.2; 32.10.9; 33.15.2; Christians would agree here), which was the opposite of appropriate womanly meekness (*Arrian, Indica* 17.3), or to women being in male company (*Diodorus Siculus, Library of History* 4.4.1; on women's relative seclusion in earlier traditional Greek society, see further Keener, "Head Coverings," 443). But some observed that not all cultures shared the same sense of shame on such matters (*Arrian, Indica* 17.3; *Diodorus Siculus, Library of History* 5.32.7). See further Paige, "Social Matrix of Women's Speech," 223–24 (also noting that Paul never applies such a designation to abuse of gifts, evaluating prophecy, or other traditional proposals).

<sup>22</sup> E.g., *Euripides, Electra* 343–44 (though there are two men). Liefeld points out that Plutarch and Livy viewed it as disgraceful for women to "express themselves visually or vocally in public" ("Women, Submission and Ministry," 142).

(especially where different passages in his writings offer different approaches, as they clearly do on women’s roles; see, e.g., Rom 16:1–2; 1 Cor 11:5; Phil 4:2–3).<sup>23</sup> A wife’s behavior reflected on her husband’s status, and certainly neither spouse should risk shaming the other (see 1 Cor 11:3–9; Prov 12:4; 31:23, 28).

Paul also has reason to be concerned for the church’s reputation in the larger society (1 Cor 6:6; 14:23), a concern that, incidentally, becomes all the more prominent in his later writings, often specifically concerning household relationships (1 Tim 3:7; 5:14; 6:1; Titus 2:5, 10).<sup>24</sup> It seems likely that in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 he supports the cultural expectation of honorable matrons’ verbal self-restraint. Exceptions could be made, as they were even in pagan religion, for divinely inspired utterances, and perhaps Paul regarded freedom to pray in house-church meetings as a nonnegotiable right of all believers (1 Cor 11:4–5; cf. Judg 4:4).<sup>25</sup> But the general cultural expectation was dominant, and Paul is usually reticent to divide Christians over cultural or

<sup>23</sup> For Paul’s strategic approach, see, e.g., Craig S. Keener, “Paul: Subversive Conservative,” *Christian History* 14, no. 3 (1995): 35–37.

<sup>24</sup> See Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives*, 139–48; Alan Padgett, “The Pauline Rationale for Submission: Biblical Feminism and the *Hina* Clauses of Titus 2:1–10,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 59 (1987): 39–52.

<sup>25</sup> Pagan Greco-Roman society also respected the speech of prophetesses. Most abundant are references to the inspiration of the mythical Sibyl (e.g., Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.129–53; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.77–102; Juvenal, *Satirae* 3.3; Heraclitus, *Epistulae* 8; throughout Sibylline Oracles, and also in her historic successors in Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 4.66.6) and the historic Delphic priestess (e.g., Longinus, *Sublime* 13.2; Callimachus, *Hymn* 4.89–90; Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 1.8.10; Cicero, *Divinatione* 1.36.79; Plutarch, *Oracles at Delphi* 21; *Moralia* 404E; *Dialogue on Love* 16; *Moralia* 759B; Dio Chrysostom, *Personal Appearance* 12; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 2.2.7).

personal issues (see [Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:9, 13; 9:12](#)).

Ancient culture reflects this general expectation of women's restraint far more pervasively than the suggestion to which I now turn. Indeed, even on its own this general expectation in antiquity could explain Paul's prohibition. Nevertheless, the specific circumstances probably implied in the text suggest an additional problem (for which I argue in *Paul, Women and Wives*). The second possibility, therefore, is that some kinds of questions were considered inappropriate, particularly questions that revealed that the questioner had failed to master the topic sufficiently.<sup>26</sup> I sometimes compare this to students whose questions reveal that they have not done the assigned reading before class.

This suggestion, however, raises an issue: Why would women be less likely to ask learned questions than men would? One could argue that this unlearned behavior reflects a transcultural, genetic limitation in women's ability to interpret Scripture. I have been a Bible professor of enough students of both genders over the years, however, to state unequivocally that such a claim is by empirical standards demonstrably false.<sup>27</sup>

More reasonably, women on average were less educated than men, an

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Plutarch, *Lectures* 18; *Moralia* 48AB; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.1.19. Plutarch's essay is the best source for the conduct of lectures in this period. Distracting others from a lecture by one's conversation was also considered rude (Plutarch, *Lectures* 13; *Moralia* 45D). Concerning silence for novices, see, e.g., the extreme example of the Pythagoreans in Seneca, *Epistles to Lucilius* 52:10; Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 1.9.3–4; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 1.1.

<sup>27</sup> Scientific studies would also undermine this claim; see Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Love, Work and Parenting in a Changing World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 75–105, as well as M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall's chapter in this edition; also note the averages in Gregg Johnson, "The Biological Basis for Gender Specific Behavior," in *RBMW*, 358–61.

assertion that no one genuinely conversant with ancient literature would doubt. To be sure, one can collect examples of many educated women in antiquity (normally from wealthier families), but on average women were far less likely to be educated than men.<sup>28</sup> More to the point, even among the Jews and God-fearers who constituted the initial nucleus of the Corinthian congregation (*Acts 18:4–5*), women would have less opportunities than men for training in Scripture. Although they learned alongside men in the synagogues, they lacked the special training that some of the men would have. More critically here, whereas most Jewish boys were taught to recite the Torah growing up, the same was not true for Jewish girls.<sup>29</sup> Teachers and primary questioners in the house churches probably were mostly men who had been part of the synagogue.<sup>30</sup>

That Paul appeals to the law as confirming his case raises the question of what statement in biblical law he may have in mind (*1 Cor 14:34*). Paul cites the law as teaching that women or wives should submit themselves (presumably to their husbands) and possibly also that it enjoins their silence. Josephus seems to have understood the law in the same way, though as part of his apologetic appeal to the broader Greco-Roman world.<sup>31</sup> What is surprising in light of this—problematic for all interpretations except the view that Paul did not write it—is that the law nowhere specifically commands either women’s silence or

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 277; James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 249, 255–56.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives*, 83–84; for women and the law in general, see, e.g., Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 4.219; m. Avot 5:21; m. Hag. 1:1; m. Sukkah 2:8; t. Ber. 6:18; b. Qidd. 34a.

<sup>30</sup> Ancient writers could state general rules with the understanding that these sometimes permitted specific exceptions. See Quintilian, *The Orator’s Education* 7.6.5; Craig S. Keener, *And Marries Another* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 24–28.

<sup>31</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.201.

their submission. Interpreters differ as to whether Paul appeals to a particular passage in the law, perhaps to the verdict at the fall ([Gen 3:16](#)), or to the general status of women in the period treated in the Pentateuch (see [1 Pet 3:5](#)). In either case, the texts *describe* women's subordination rather than prescribe it, and Paul could uphold the law to avoid offense ([1 Cor 9:20](#)).

Though inspired, biblical law worked within a broader cultural milieu and, like any civil law, limited sin rather than creating the kingdom ideal. Because it often represents concessions to human weakness enshrined in existing culture, very few would argue that it represents God's highest ideal (see, e.g., [Ex 21:21](#); [Lev 19:20](#); [Mk 10:5](#)).<sup>32</sup>

Paul might well appeal to the creation order, as in [1 Corinthians 11:8–9](#) (though only those who press transculturally Paul's mandate concerning head coverings in this earlier chapter should press transculturally the claims of [1 Cor 14:34](#)). But the creation narrative itself does not teach women's subordination, and when Paul appeals to the creation narrative, his appeals do not force us to read it this way, especially given his application of Scripture (including some texts related to the creation of man and woman) elsewhere in his writings.<sup>33</sup>

Assuming (as I do) that Paul would have known this, it seems easier to believe that he appeals to the law as allowing rather than mandating this situation. God challenged some aspects of ancient Near Eastern patriarchal tradition but nevertheless worked within patriarchal societies (see also [1 Pet 3:5–6](#)), including

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives*, 188–93. All students of the Old Testament are familiar with the repetition of many of the categories of casuistic law found in earlier Mesopotamian legal collections.

<sup>33</sup> See in much more detail in Keener, "Women in Ministry," 58–63; Joy Elasky Fleming, "[A Rhetorical Analysis of Genesis 2–3 with Implication for a Theology of Man and Women](#)" (PhD diss., University of Strasbourg, 1987). See also Mary Conway's chapter on Genesis in this volume.

the modified Greco-Roman patriarchy of Paul's day. This hardly mandates the continuance of such structures today when the spirit of Paul's teaching militates against them, any more than we would maintain slavery today (e.g., Eph 6:5–9).

## PAUL'S SOLUTION

Rather than let the women learn by asking questions in the church, Paul admonishes them to ask their husbands at home. From what we know of the culture, most of the women would have been married, and most such statements can address the general group without denying the existence of exceptions.<sup>34</sup>

To most modern ears this proposal sounds sexist, but if we read Paul less anachronistically, in his own social context it would have helped the women as well as established order. Paul implicitly makes husbands responsible for their wives' tutoring, but Plutarch tells us that most men did not believe that their wives could learn anything. (This would be especially true of Greek men, who on average were a decade or more older than their wives.) Plutarch regards himself as one of the most progressive voices of his day because he instructs a young man to take an interest in his wife's education—though Plutarch goes on to note that this is necessary because if left to themselves women produce only base passions and folly.<sup>35</sup> Happily, Paul's concern for women's private tutoring does not cite such grounds.

Paul avoids social impropriety by advising the women to avoid questioning

<sup>34</sup> For the married status of most women, see Keener, *And Marries Another*, 68–74; Keener, “Marriage,” 680–81; for general statements allowing exceptions, see *And Marries Another*, 24–28.

<sup>35</sup> Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 48; *Moralia* 145BE. Earlier, see similarly Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 3.10–16; 7.4–5, 10–22; 9.1.

other men during the Christian-education component of the gathering, but he is not against their learning. Yet, as noted above, their lack of learning may have been precisely part of the problem. With greater understanding, they might become better able to articulate themselves intellectually in the same assemblies in which they could pray and prophesy. Viewed in this light, the real issues are not gender but propriety and learning—neither of which need restrain women’s voices in the church today.

## CONCLUSION

Scholars have read this passage from various angles. Most likely the passage addresses disruptive questions in an environment where silence was expected of new learners—which most women were. It also addresses a broader social context in which women were expected not to speak much with men to whom they were not related, as a matter of propriety. As in some other parts of the chapter (such as [1 Cor 14:23](#)), Paul is concerned with the church’s witness to society. Paul thus upholds church order and avoids appearances of social impropriety (as he did with head coverings in [1 Cor 11:2–16](#)); he also supports learning before speaking. None of these principles prohibits women in very different cultural settings from speaking God’s word.