

Introduction: principles of interpretation

One of my convictions about the interpretation of scripture is that when, as in this case, there is a hard passage by Paul that is universally held¹ to be difficult to interpret, it is essential that any interpretation is both internally consistent in itself and in its context and also is consistent with other passages of teaching and with Paul's practice.

My book *Growing Women Leaders* expands on this in terms of hermeneutical principles, and in one of the most recent books on Paul's writings on women, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, Philip Payne affirms his belief in the inerrancy of Scripture, and concludes his exploration of 'women as ministry leaders' with these words: 'Paul's teachings about women in the church ought to be interpreted in harmony with Paul's actual practice. Since Paul's own affirmations of colleagues who are women are so extensive and their range of ministries is so broad, one ought to expect corresponding affirmations of women in his teaching.'²

I would also expect to see coherence within the whole of scripture, and I believe the interpretation I am offering meets this too. To cite Payne again as an example, his book has a further foundational chapter exploring what Payne calls 'Paul's theological axioms' (drawn from creation, from salvation in Christ, from Pentecost, and from the church) which imply the equality of man and woman, and the interpretation which follows is coherent with these axioms, and thus with the whole of scripture.

Commentators have wrestled for many years to understand Paul's teaching and practice in relation to his context. In their book *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, written in 1989, Peter Cotterell and Max Turner puzzled on how we could understand this passage when we knew so little about the context: 'The English renderings can only offer a very general guide to what is in the text, since all translators agree as to the complexity of the ideas being expressed and, more importantly, perhaps as to the problem posed by our almost total ignorance of the sociology of the situation under discussion.'³ Even while coming to their own conclusions as to the meaning, they end their discussion: 'Real language can only be satisfactorily understood from cotext *and* context. The former we have. The latter is irrevocably lost.'⁴

While much may be irrevocably lost, there has been a considerable amount of research, even since 1989, which now gives both documentary evidence of women's roles as deacons and presbyters in the church (in books such as K. Madigan and C. Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A documentary history*)⁵, and new insights into the context of the New Testament churches⁶. We are now more aware of how Christian women seem to have been caught in the cultural flux of the time. Women had some freedom to participate in pagan cult activities, and under Roman law to hold political and religious offices. On the other hand, in first-century Hellenism women were generally treated as their husband's property and expected to observe social conventions in order to avoid any appearance of impropriety. The challenge for Paul, then, writing to the Corinthian church about church order and right use of the concept of 'freedom', was: 'How could women demonstrate Christian liberty and equality in Christ without bringing offense to the gospel?'⁷

¹ See eg P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (SPCK, 1989), p 316 and Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Zondervan, 2009) p 109.

² Payne, p 68.

³ Cotterell and Turner, p 316-7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 328.

⁵ The John Hopkins University Press, 2005.

⁶ Eg Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Macdonald, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Fortress Press, 2006); Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: illuminating ancient ways of life* (Baker Academic, 2009).

⁷ Payne, p 34-5.

Philip Payne argues that in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul does this by ‘honoring women as fully human even though this clashed with cultural conventions, and he affirms prophecy if done with modest deportment.’⁸

The short answer to this question

The short answer to the question of what 1 Corinthians 11 (verses 1-16) tells us about gender and church order is ‘very little’, beyond some broad principles that can be applied to how leaders of worship should dress today.

Paul reminds the church in Corinth to imitate him (v 1) and to maintain the traditions he has handed on to them (v 2). He affirms both men and women in their role in public prayer and prophesying (v 4, 14 and 5, 13), but reminds men that they should minister with heads uncovered (v 4, 7, 14 - so as not to risk being associated with homosexuality), and women with their heads covered (v 5-6, 10, 13, 15 - so as not to risk being associated with prostitution or adultery) – so that both sexes conform to the prevailing social norms. In worship, men are to be seen to minister as men and women as women, not undermining their ministries by risking being associated with homosexuality or undermining marriage by being sexually suggestive. If anyone should dispute what Paul is saying, he (and other churches) has no custom of allowing women to ‘let their hair down’ in worship (or to let men wear effeminate hair); churches need to conform to what has already been established, and to *all* the traditions Paul has handed on to them (v 16, relating back to v 1 and 2).

The principle for the church today would be that leaders in worship should not adopt hairstyles or dress which undermine marriage or heterosexual relationships. Or as Payne puts it, Paul’s message is: ‘Don’t use your freedom in Christ as an excuse to dress in a way that is sexually suggestive or subversive. Keep it clean!’⁹

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In the light of the debate about verse 3 in particular, the rest of this paper seeks briefly to address some of the issues which underpin this interpretation and which relate to the debate in the church today about women’s place as ministers and leaders.

What is the issue that Paul was seeking to address in this part of his letter?

Paul is writing to the church in Corinth both in response to concerns reported to him (1 Corinthians 1:11), particularly about disputes and disunity, and issues they have raised (1 Corinthians 7:1). His central concern in this passage is the conduct of worship, which starts in chapter 10 and continues through 11, 12, 13, and 14.

There appear to be a number of issues that have resulted in disorderly worship (14:40). Women and men alike are praying and prophesying publicly in worship, but Paul is concerned that (some) women were doing this without covering their heads, and some men were covering their heads by wearing their hair long. Some women seem to have been exalting in their Christian freedom, or enjoying the revelry of loose hair such as their counterparts in pagan worship or Dionysiac debauchery enjoyed. But culturally, for a woman to have an uncovered head (v 5) was equal to having her hair cut or shaved (v 6), and this was shameful. Women who failed to cover their heads brought shame to both themselves and their husbands: ‘Hair serves for a covering...for their very adornment properly consists in this, that, by being massed together upon the crown, it wholly covers the very citadel of the head with an encirclement of hair.’¹⁰ In his book, Payne gives 14 reasons for interpreting women’s ‘uncovered hair’ as referring to hair let down.

⁸ Ibid., p 35.

⁹ Payne, p 214.

¹⁰ Tertullian, quoted Payne p 161.

Men who wore long hair or wore long hair up like a woman's hair, were similarly causing shame and disgrace, and Payne similarly lists 14 reasons to identify men's head covering with effeminate hair, and cites examples from the time: 'Long hair is not fit for men... because many rage for intercourse with a man'.¹¹

Thus, Paul writes, in Corinth for men to worship with a covered head/long hair, or for women to worship without a covered head was to offend against cultural norms, and thus potentially bring the gospel into disrepute. The function of verse 3 is to highlight the relationships affected by how men and women cover their heads. The point Paul is making is that men and women are harming each other and damaging their relationship with Christ and God, because 'the source of every man is Christ, and the source of woman is Adam' and – to relate Paul's concerns in the Godhead and to complete the chronological list of relationships: the creation of man, the creation of woman and the incarnation – 'the source of Christ is the Godhead.'¹²

In the following verses Paul gives a series of reasons and connections. In verses 7 and following, he advances a theological reason why men should not have their head covered. Man is the image and reflection of God, so to look like a woman is to abuse the image of man in creation. The woman (not another man) is the pride and joy of man. Man did not come from woman, but she was made from man (as we read in Genesis) to be his partner.

What does 1 Corinthians 11: 10 mean?

'For this reason a woman ought to have an authority on her head, because of the angels'. This verse has proved one of the most confusing for interpreters. The verb used is active, so the meaning is 'to have authority', not 'to be under authority'. Her 'authority' may be that which she has over her own head. To put it another way, it makes sense to read this verse: 'On account of this, the woman ought to exercise authority over her head [by putting her hair up]'.¹³

'On account of the angels' is perhaps the most obscure part of this. Commentators are of the opinion that the angels are good angels rather than fallen angels. There are a number of references to angels observing worship (hence ...'with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven...') so this probably refers to women being seen not just by other humans (the concern of the passage) but by angels: 'the woman ought to have control of her hair by doing it up modestly, on account of the angels [who observe worship and report to God]'.¹³

Essential equality

'However' (verse 11) is a break word, signifying a change in the direction of the argument. While making it clear that men and women are different, and should not dress so as to look like each other, Paul also wants to emphasise the essential unity, equality and true complementarity of men and women. This has been a theme earlier in the letter. In chapter 7 Paul is both gender-specific, addressing men and women separately, but also gender-inclusive, emphasising mutuality in a series of paired principles. One of the most notable of these is in verses 25-35, concerning marriage and singleness. Paul addresses men and women in similar ways, making it clear that either may choose devotion to ministry instead of marriage – in women's case, contrary to the cultural tradition that women should marry.¹⁴

Here in chapter 11, verses 11-12 stress the equality and interdependence of the men and women, both under God: 'However, in the Lord neither is woman set apart from (or of different nature than) man, nor is man set apart from (or of different nature than) woman'. The hair issues addressed earlier symbolise men and women setting themselves apart from each other, but they

¹¹ Pseudo-Phyocylides, quote Payne p 143.

¹² Payne, p 212.

¹³ Payne, p 213.

¹⁴ Ronald W. Pierce, First Corinthians 7: Paul's neglected treatise on gender', *Priscilla Papers* 23:3, pp 8-13.

are not. Ultimately both have come from God in creation: woman came from man (from his side in creation), and in birth man comes through woman.

In verses 13-15 Paul appeals to ‘nature’ – the regular or established order of things. This cannot mean allowing ‘nature’ to run its course, since that would result in the hair of both men and women growing long! In a culture where respectable women wore their hair long and men their hair short (this has not, of course, been a universal norm), it was ‘unnatural’ for men to wear long hair or women short hair.

While some commentators have argued that the ‘custom’ in verse 16 is ‘being contentious’, that seems to be less of a custom and more of a sinful attitude, and the current consensus is that the custom is that of women letting their hair down. The discussion clearly runs to verse 16; in verse 17 Paul moves on to something about which he does not commend them (as opposed to commending them in verse 2). Those who were breaching social custom in matters of hairstyle were also breaching the customs established by Paul in the churches where he had oversight.

Kephale (in verse 3): authority or source?

The word *kephale* in verse 3 has proved notoriously hard to interpret. One of the difficulties is to separate literal and metaphorical uses of the word, and to try to work out which of a number of metaphorical uses is correct in each case.

In the vast majority of uses of the word in Scripture, *kephale* refers literally to the top part of the body, the head. Metaphorically, *kephale* had a range of meanings. For example, just as in English, *kephale* may refer to ‘source’ or ‘origin’ as in the source/head of a river; and while in English ‘leadership’ is the most common metaphorical meaning of ‘head’, this is not the case in Greek. There are only two texts in the New Testament that speak of the man as the *kephale* of the woman (the other being Ephesians 5:23), which makes this word exceptionally hard to interpret.

An article by Alan Johnson in *Priscilla Papers* charts the theological ping-pong which was triggered by an article by Stephen Bedale which appeared in 1954 and which questioned the (then) prevailing metaphorical meaning of *kephale* as ‘authority’ and proposing the alternatives of ‘first’, ‘beginning’ or ‘source’. It was as part of the countering of this argument by James Hurley and Wayne Grudem that the concept of a ‘hierarchy of headship authority’ and the connection to the Trinity appeared.

While arguments on the ‘authority’ side continued with multiple citations from other Greek writings in support of this view, a variety of new insights began to emerge. Andrew Perriman (1998) argued that the verse was about the shame that might come to a woman if her head was uncovered, and Judith Gundry-Volf (1997) argued that both women and men were ignoring social boundaries, signified by how they covered their heads.

By 2000 we had reached the point where Anthony Thiselton concluded in his commentary on 1 Corinthians that arguing for either ‘authority over’ or ‘source’ as a clear meaning on purely lexical grounds was not tenable. The context must be important in determining the meaning. In verses 3-16 Paul plays on the multiple meanings of *kephale*, and whatever *kephale* means in this context, it does not ‘denote a relation of subordination or authority over’.¹⁵

More recently, Gordon Fee argues that it is illegitimate to import into this passage some of Paul’s later usages of *kephale*. That is, Paul does not intend each of the pairings to be ‘head over’ in the same way as ‘head over’ the powers (Colossians 2:10, 15). Since there is no head-

¹⁵ Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 2000) p 820.

body analogy here, it is more appropriate to take the meaning as ‘source’ or ‘origin’, an interpretation that fits with verses 8 and 12.¹⁶

Philip Payne notes that the majority view has now shifted to the meaning of ‘source’ rather than ‘authority’, and gives 15 key reasons,¹⁷ which I find convincing. His argument includes refuting claims put forward by Wayne Grudem that the meaning of ‘head’ as ‘authority over’ was a well-established meaning at the time, and argues that it was not.¹⁸ In contrast, ‘source’ is an established meaning. Attempts to use *kephale* to mean ‘authority over’ make for three different kinds of authority relationships, whereas ‘source’ is more consistent, and fits better.

Thus ‘God is the source of Christ’ and ‘man/Adam is the source of woman/Eve’, an idea that Paul refers to in verse 8 and qualifies in verses 11-12. This avoids introducing a 4-fold hierarchical order into a verse where Paul has 3 paired relations, which are not in the order one would expect if this was about hierarchy: one would expect the sequence to start with God and end with woman. (A number of writers have also questioned the use of this verse to draw parallels between the Father and Christ, and man and woman, when the nature of those being compared in the apparent analogy are so different: divine vs human, all male vs male and female, and so on.)

In addition, much early Greek commentary on this verse interprets *kephale* to mean ‘source’, and Payne quote Cyril of Alexandria and Photius summing up the work of earlier Greek writers.¹⁹

What sort of ministry is prophecy (v 4f)?

This passage is part of a wider discussion of order in worship, focusing particularly on prophecy, which carries on to 14:40. The first few verses of chapter 11 make it quite clear that women were regular participants in the ‘praying and prophesying’ which was part of the worship in the churches under Paul’s oversight. Paul refers in verse 4 to ‘any man who prays or prophesies...’ and in verse 5 to women in a parallel way.

This is also in accord with other references in the letter. In Paul’s ranking of these and similar giftings in 1 Corinthians 12:28 prophesying precedes teaching, so logically women cannot be restricted from teaching if they are allowed to prophesy. And prophesying is grouped with teaching and other gifts in 1 Corinthians 14:6, so one may assume that women and men together shared in all these ministries in the Corinthian church. R.T France notes²⁰ that this passage may thus help to shed light on what Paul intended in his apparent restrictions on women in chapter 14 of this same letter and in 1 Timothy 2.

In conclusion: what does 1 Corinthians 11 teach us about gender and church order?

The idea that there is something called ‘headship’ commended in these verses has led some to a conviction that a man must always be ‘head’ (of a woman): thus (for example) a woman cannot lead a church or be a bishop. In some versions of this, a woman can lead (an all-women meeting, for example) if a man is present to ‘cover’ her.

I believe, however, that these verses do not have anything to say about a hierarchy that places man over woman. Taken in its context, as a passage concerned about church order, these verses were addressed equally to men and women, reminding them to remain within the traditions Paul

¹⁶ Gordon D Fee, ‘Praying and Prophesying in the Assemblies: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16’ in R Pierce and RM Groothuis (ed) *Discovering Biblical Equality* (IVP, 2004), p 154-5.

¹⁷ Payne, p 117-137.

¹⁸ Ibid, p 120.

¹⁹ Ibid, p 136-7.

²⁰ R.T France, *Women in the Church’s Ministry* (Paternoster, 1995), p 46.

had taught them, by honouring existing social conventions and thus maintaining the cultural markers which differentiated men and women and which honoured marriage.

Paul clearly commends women who were ministering in the church by praying and prophesying. In the context of the current debate about women as ministers and leaders within the church, whatever precisely is meant by 'prophesying', Paul clearly rates it more highly than teaching, so it is inconsistent to argue that women cannot have a teaching ministry in the church today. This is one of a number of passages where Paul, notable for having a number of women as his fellow-workers, commends the ministry of women and does not differentiate between the kinds of ministry or leadership they may undertake in the church. So neither need we.

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