How Should We Interpret 1 Corinthians 11:2–16?

by Ronald W. Pierce

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul calls the men and women who were praying and prophesying in the assembly at Corinth to respect culturally relevant gender markers like head coverings, hair lengths, and hairstyles as a way of honoring God and each other. In doing so, he uses the metaphor of “head” and emphasizes interdependence between men and women. He shapes this passage in such a way that the key points are set in parallel groups with the strongest emphasis appearing at the center.

As he did in his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul utilizes the metaphor “headship” in a creative way. In Ephesians 5, he started with the common cultural assumption of “male headship” including “male authority,” then dramatically turned the idea upside down emphasizing in its place mutual submission in terms of a radical and sacrificial love—yes, specifically from husbands. Paul makes a similar play on words here, though this time he nuances the other common idea of male “headship” in terms of “source” or “point of origin,” such as the “head” of a river. (Examples of this are found in both creation accounts, such as in Gen. 1:1, where the word usually translated “in the beginning” is literally “at the head.”) In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul employs this “point of origin” imagery to emphasize the essential unity between men and women. He starts by explaining that “the head of every man is Christ” (v. 3), most likely referring to Christ’s role in creation (see John 1:4). Christ is the head of every man as the Creator because he is the “source” or “point of origin” of the first man Adam. Paul then extends his use of creation imagery in 1 Corinthians 11:3 with his second comparison, “the head of woman is man.” Just as Adam came from Christ the Creator of all things, so Eve was taken from Adam (Gen. 2:18–25). In his third comparison, Paul steps back to see the bigger picture by declaring, “the head of Christ is God.” Perhaps it seems surprising that Paul’s order was not “woman-man, man-Christ, Christ-God” (thus, implying a hierarchy with God the Father at the top). But, the apostle is not making that point here—in fact, nowhere does he make that point. Instead, his order is, “man-Christ, woman-man, Christ-God.” This follows solid New Testament Christology by associating Jesus with the creation of man and woman “in the beginning” (John 1:1-5) and declaring without contradiction that Jesus “came from God” in the incarnation (John 1:13).

Taken together, the three comparisons in 1 Corinthians 11:3 are representative of Paul’s recurring theme of mutuality. In other words, both women and men come from God (Gen. 1:26–27) even though the man was created first and the woman was taken from him (Gen. 2). Paul’s all-inclusive reading of the creation and procreation orders is reinforced in the center sections of this passage (v. 2–3). Understanding good traditions: Christ the head of man, man the head of woman—God the head of Christ.

Parallel Structure in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16

| A   | (v. 2-3) Understanding good traditions: Christ the head of man, man the head of woman—God the head of Christ. |
| B   | (v. 4-6) Men who pray/prophesy with head covered, and women who do so with head uncovered, both dishonor their heads. |
| C   | (v. 7-9) Man the image/glory of God and woman the glory of man; woman created from and for man. |
| D   | (v. 10) Therefore women should exercise authority over their heads because of the angels. |
| C1  | (v. 11-12) In Christ women and men are interdependent. Woman came from man who thereafter comes from woman—all come from God. |
| B1  | (v. 13-15) Women should pray with heads covered. Nature shows men’s long hair is disgraceful, while women’s long hair is a covering. |
| A1  | (v. 16) We have no other practice—nor do the churches of God. |
Jewish rabbis in Paul’s day, steeped in the Hebrew literature of the Old Testament. The climactic punch line is, “It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head because of the angels.” Let’s unpack his cryptic yet powerful statement piece-by-piece.

First, exactly what is Paul’s command to the women who were praying and prophesying in the assemblies at Corinth? Literally, the text reads, “a woman ought to have authority over her own head” (NIV)—not a “sign” or “symbol” of authority as some translations add. In the church at Corinth, Paul speaks specifically to the women who are “praying” (leading public worship) or “prophesying” (preaching the gospel) in front of the church assembly. These women leaders are to have or exercise “authority over their own heads.” This could mean one of three things. One, it may mean something as simple as letting women decide how they wanted to “cover” their literal heads—that is, which hairstyle or external covering they prefer. Or, two, perhaps Paul is reminding the women to exercise that authority and keep their heads covered. Or, three, since Paul specifically acknowledges that the husband is the “head” of the wife at the beginning of this discussion (1 Cor. 11:3), his advice to the women prophets may carry forward his recurring theme of mutuality. In this sense, the apostle would be reminding the privileged male leader of the Roman household that when his wife speaks as a prophet, she speaks with authority over her “head” meaning her husband.

Whether Paul was endorsing the right of a woman prophet to choose her head covering, calling her to cover her head, or validating her authority as a spokesperson for God (like Deborah to Barak in Judg. 4–5, or Huldah to Josiah in 2 Kings 22; 2 Chron. 34), it is clear that women were serving as worship leaders and prophets in the New Testament church. Moreover, they were doing so with the apostle’s blessing and even with a divinely given sense of authority.

Second, what is the reason for Paul’s command? In a centered structure such as this one we must look on both sides of the main section. In this case, 1 Corinthians 11:7–9 and 11–12 complete the larger thought. As we saw above, these verses speak of the mutual interdependence of men and women as illustrated in the creation-procreation orders. Thus, the apostle reasons, (a) it is because man came first in creation and (b) because women come first in procreation that (c) a woman worship leader or prophet ought to have authority over her head. In other words, his advice to the women is linked directly to the idea of rebalancing patriarchy into mutuality. Though the men generally ruled in the household in that day, men and women could equally share leadership in the church.

The other reason given here is “because of the angels.” Even though there are almost as many interpretations of this little clause as there are interpreters, we dare not ignore the apostle’s words. To me, it seems most reasonable to connect “the angels” with the fact that many of these women were prophesying. In the Bible, as well as in much of the extra-biblical Jewish literature at this time, angels were the ones who mediated prophecy. In other words, they communicated God’s Word to the prophets who in turn communicated it to God’s people. We find this in several of the later books of the Old Testament (for example, Dan. 8–12; Zech. 1–6). Therefore, because women prophets were empowered by angels they ought to have authority over their own heads.

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul is concerned that both men and women should exercise their leadership gifts—with appropriate authority—while presenting themselves in a manner that celebrates the uniqueness of their respective genders. The cultural markers for this will vary widely from time-to-time and from place-to-place, but the principle endures. Although our appearance should not be dictated by the culture around us, we should be sensitive to how we appear within that context—especially regarding those to whom we minister.

Want more information on 1 Corinthians 11? Check out these and other recommended resources at cbeinternational.org/1cor11.

Short and Sweet:

Partners in Marriage and Ministry by Ronald W. Pierce
“1 Corinthians 11:2–16” by Allison Young

Bring on the Greek:

1 Corinthians by Alan Johnson
Discovering Biblical Equality ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, see chapter 8 by Gordon D. Fee
Man and Woman, One in Christ, see chapters 6–12, by Philip B. Payne

Good for Group Discussion:

1 Corinthians by N.T. Wright
“Beginning With the End: Understanding the Passage from the Bottom Up” by Alan G. Padgett

Portions of this article are taken from Ron Pierce’s new book, Partners in Marriage and Ministry. Buy your copy, in print or e-book format, at equalitydepot.com. Save 25% when you use discount code MUT1COR.