

Beginning with the End in 1 Cor. 11:2–16

Understanding the passage from the bottom up

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AS THE WORD OF GOD IN HUMAN WORDS, THE SCRIPTURES can and do speak with a fresh voice today. It is sometimes hard, however, to read a familiar passage in a new way. The purpose of this essay is a simple one. I hope you will come away with a new understanding of one paragraph in Paul's letters that deals with women and men in the church. The paragraph in question is 1 Cor. 11:2-16, a passage I have been studying and writing about for over twenty years.¹

While many ways of understanding this passage have developed over the millennia, the interpretation I prefer will require a fresh approach to the text. To this end, just to overcome years of misreading, I am going to ask you to read the passage from the bottom up.

What is the main argument?

It often helps to look at the end of a difficult argument in order to understand it better. What is the author's main point? This should guide our interpretation of the whole passage. Paul's arguments are often quite difficult to follow. He was not a linear thinker. His prose is circular, even sinuous. The trick of looking at the end or main point of his argument works on many different passages. Consider Romans, for example.

Romans 8 is one of my favorite chapters in the whole Bible. It ends with a ringing declaration of the love of God. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from God's love in Christ. But the very next words are jarring in their change of direction. Paul writes that he is speaking the truth in Christ—not lying—about his great sorrow for his people, the Jews. What is the connection here? Many commentators have been puzzled by the "insertion" of chapters 9-11 in Paul's overall argument in Romans.

We have to remember that Paul's original text did not have verse or chapter divisions. In fact, paper was so expensive that scribes did not even leave spaces between words. So the "jump" from 8:39 to 9:1 must have been even more jarring to Paul's original readers. What is going on here? The answer is revealed only at the end of this long section, in chapter 11. "Has God rejected his people?" Paul asks. No! "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew" (11:1-2). Aha! Now we see why, when speaking

of the inseparable love of God for his people, Paul began to think of his own people, the Jews. Did God's love abandon them? Many of them stumbled and fell. Just as some Jews turned from God to idols, so in Paul's day some rejected the Messiah. God did not reject his people: they rejected him. We do not fully grasp the start of Romans 9 until we get to the end of chapter 11.

Another example of peeking at the end in order to better understand the beginning comes from 1 Corinthians. In chapter 8, Paul begins his discussion of food sacrificed to idols. This is a long, complex, and cyclical argument from 8:1 to 11:1. For reasons that are not clear at first, Paul begins talking about knowledge. "All of us possess knowledge," he writes (8:1). What is going on here? How can we make sense of the beginning of this argument? We can get a good clue by looking at the end of the chapter, where he says that if eating meat causes one of my sisters or brothers to fall, it would be better never to eat meat. Not everyone has the "knowledge" that some

Corinthians admired: the knowledge that "an idol is nothing in the world" and "there is no God but one" (8:4). Based upon their superior knowledge, some people in Corinth were eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols in pagan temples. Many commentators agree that the phrases in 8:4 come from the Corinthians themselves, probably from the letter they wrote to Paul (7:1). For this reason, the NRSV puts them in quotation marks. These Corinthians "knew" that idols were nothing, and could make no difference to the meat they ate. This

practice, however, upset others who were against idol worship.

Looking at the end of Paul's argument, we can see why he began with a discussion of knowledge. We can see the point of his writing, "Knowledge puffs up but love builds up." It becomes clear that 8:1-6 is not Paul's own theology but his description of the theology of his opponents, even quoting some of their own ideas. Paul then begins to refute their practice in 8:7: "But not everyone has this knowledge." So peeking at the end of this chapter helps us rightly understand 8:1-6. In this case, looking at the end is not only helpful but seems necessary for a proper interpretation of this passage.



Padgett's understanding of 1 Cor. 11:2-16, when he writes of the freedom Paul argues women should have regarding what they wear on their heads during worship, is portrayed by this original artwork titled "Followers of Jesus" by Anne C. Brink (painted acrylic on muslin).

What is the custom?

Our task is a clear, attentive, and reasonable reading of 1 Cor. 11:2-16. This is possible, I have found, only by knowing the end of the text from the beginning. To this end, not only will we examine the passage from the bottom up, we will also note some background knowledge, which will help us understand Paul's words better. So let us begin to study this text, not at the beginning, but at the end.

This is the longest single passage in which Paul deals with issues relating to women in the church. His concern does not arise from his own agenda, but rather from a custom in the Corinthian church that he wishes to oppose. This much is clear from 11:16: "And if anyone is disposed to be argumentative, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God." Paul was forced, time and again, to contend with various groups in Corinth and their poor theology and ethics. He corrects them patiently, like a good friend or parent, but also knows they are inclined to be argumentative. So in the end, he appeals to the practice of all the other churches. They make no strange demands! So why should some Corinthians impose this custom on other believers? Paul has in mind here a particular custom and a particular group of Christians at Corinth who were insisting on this custom.

What was the custom? That is a question that has troubled commentators for thousands of years. The best clues to the nature of this custom come from verses 13-15 and not from the earlier part of the passage. In verse 15 Paul writes, "For hair is given [by nature] to her instead of a covering." This phrase is important to Paul's argument. First of all, we discover that the custom has to do with proper dress in church. In particular, the custom has to do with covering the head in church. Paul argues that nature has given women long hair instead of a covering.² In verse 16 Paul gives an argument from what the rest of the churches do, that is, an appeal to consensus. In these verses (13-15), he is giving an argument from nature.

When we consider earlier verses, we discover that Paul mounts a total of four arguments against the Corinthian custom he is rejecting. We can only suppose that he found something in this custom offensive to his christocentric thinking. His first argument has to do with the order of creation, which is assessing who came first, man or woman (vv. 8-10). Connected to this argument is Paul's assertion that "woman is the glory of man." The second argument is christological. In the Lord, differences between males and females have been overcome (vv. 11, 12). In his next two arguments, Paul moves from theology to common sense. "Judge for yourselves," he writes (v. 13). The third argument is from nature (vv. 13-15), while the final argument is from the consensus of the other churches (v. 16). We should pause and reflect upon Paul's argument from nature before proceeding up the passage further.

Paul was familiar with arguments from nature. A native of Tarsus, Paul must have known of Stoic philosophy. Several Stoic philosophers hailed from Tarsus. In fact, the Stoics used to argue from nature, that is from the way things are in a natural state. Paul's argument, then (which

really turns on common sense) is a simple one: in a natural state, women have long hair, which nature has given them as a covering. This is part of his argument against the Corinthian custom.

Part of the custom in Corinth, therefore, seems to be that women should be covered in church. This fact is clear from the beginning of verse 13, when Paul asks the Corinthians to use their own common sense. "Judge for yourselves: is it proper for an uncovered woman to pray to God?" This peek at the end of the passage shows us the main issue between Paul and the Corinthians. Paul's answer to this question has been grossly misunderstood, however. In fact, this question may not be a question at all. Paul may have written a statement: "Judge for yourselves: it is proper for an uncovered woman to pray to God." This is a real possibility, which should not be ignored (as it usually is). In the original text, there were no question marks, no real punctuation of any kind. So perhaps this was originally a statement, not a question.

On the other hand, it is possible that this is in fact a question. 1 Cor. 10:15 might support the idea to take this part of verse 13 as a question. There, Paul writes, "I speak to reasonable people, judge for yourselves," and this is followed by a question. However if Paul is asking a question in verse 13, what is his answer? This becomes clear in Paul's next sentence.

Even if we insist that verse 13 is a question, the next verse makes no sense as anything other than a statement. It is usually forced into being another question, but in fact, never has made any sense as a question.³ The translation I recommend is this: "But nature herself has not taught you that if a man has long hair it is a shame, but if a woman has long hair it is her glory; for hair is given to her instead of a covering."⁴ If Paul did ask the question, "Is it proper for an uncovered woman to pray to God?," his answer is, Yes. He appeals to the natural state of things, where men by nature grow long hair. There is no shame in a man with long hair. On the other hand, nature has given women long hair instead of (or as the equivalent of) the coverings we often place on women's heads for cultural reasons (customs). Long hair is natural; it is not a "glory." Paul appeals, past local human customs, to the way God made us. As a statement, this sentence is a pretty good argument from nature, against human customs. The force of Paul's words here has been blunted, however, by misunderstanding and mistranslation.

Translated as a question, this sentence would read, "Does not nature herself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is a shame, but if a woman wears long hair, it is her glory?" The clear, obvious, sensible answer to this question is, No. Nature teaches us no such thing! Yet the vast majority of commentators have forced Paul into the obviously false answer, "Yes, nature does teach that long hair on a man is shameful but long hair on a woman is glorious." When we interpret anyone's written text, we should use the principle of charity. Let us seek to understand the text in a way that makes sense of the author's words. Of course, at times authors do write rather silly things. My point is that tradition has done Paul a

disservice in this case. The most sensible and reasonable interpretation of Paul's words is that he is making a statement.⁵

When you read Paul's own words in a rational manner, his argument is clear, and so is the custom that Paul is arguing against. This custom was based on social shame and on social honor or "glory." It was shameful, at least in Corinth in those days, for a man to wear long hair (especially in church). It was also wrong for a woman to be uncovered (sometimes translated "unveiled") while praying. The custom Paul is opposing now becomes clear: on a woman long hair is beautiful, womanly, glorious; but on a man it is shameful. These are the "covering" customs that Paul is arguing against. The custom becomes clear only when we pay careful attention to the end of Paul's argument. We will study the social background of this custom in more detail as we approach the top of the passage, where Paul has more to say on this topic.

A Christ-centered response

Verses 11-12 cover Paul's christological argument against the Corinthian custom. "Nevertheless, in the Lord, woman is not different from man nor man different from woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes from woman, and all people come from God." The normal translation of this verse is unusually free of misunderstanding (for our passage, at least). Yet the power of what Paul is saying has been overlooked. The phrase "in the Lord" is not a minor one for Paul. On the contrary, everything in Paul's writing can be summed up under the concept of "being in Christ." Everything he says about justification, about holiness, about love, about the body of Christ, about spiritual gifts—everything can be summarized in the concept of "being in Christ" because this is the heart and soul of Paul's ethics and theology. Again and again, Paul corrects the Corinthians on the basis of his understanding of new life in Christ. This passage is no exception.

Paul often uses the term "nevertheless" to summarize the point he is making. Here, his main point is rather obvious if we just pay attention to what he wrote. In the Lord, these differences of dress are of no importance. Social customs of dress, which distinguish male and female, should not inhibit a woman or a man from praying or prophesying in the worship of the Lord. After all, even if there was a temporal priority of man before woman in the creation story (Gen. 2), now men are born from women (their mothers) so that the balance is restored. This balance between male and female is key to Paul's entire argument, including the way he explains the Corinthian custom in 11:3-7. Because of this balance, Paul wants to affirm that "all people come from God." The Greek text just says, "all come from God," and is usually translated "all things." Paul's argument, however, is not about things but about men and women. All people come from God, and the implication of this fact, theologically, is that all people are created in the image of God (not just men, as verse 7 states).

That Paul would insist on gender balance in the image

of God, and in the Lord, is nothing new. We find this same balance in 1 Cor. 7 and Gal. 3. Paul was also quite willing to set aside accepted social divisions in the church. The division between Jew and Gentile was, if anything, even more central than between man and woman for the Jewish theologians of Paul's day. Yet Paul sets aside this division in the Lord: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him" (Rom. 10:12). The whole argument of the letter to the Galatians is that the distinguishing sign of circumcision, as a cultic marker, is set aside in the church (that is, in Christ). Paul's argument in this passage parallels Galatians. The distinguishing marks of short hair on men and head coverings for women are of no consequence in the Lord, and in church.

This view may seem rather "advanced" coming from a Jewish Christian of the first century. But we forget that Jesus accepted both women and men into his fellowship, and accepted women alongside men as his disciples. So Paul had a good role model in seeking gender balance in the Lord! He specifically writes, in 11:1, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." The Jesus movement provided new, open opportunities for women. Scholars have only recently understood the extent of this new freedom for women. Paul was in basic agreement with his Lord on this point.

The interpretation of Paul's words that I am pressing for becomes even more clear in verse 10. Alas, here we have another case of an often misunderstood and mistranslated sentence. Translators have inserted the words "symbol of" into this verse for a very long time. What Paul actually wrote is this: "For this reason a woman ought to have authority over her head, because of the angels." The NRSV, at least, has recognized this translation as an alternative in a footnote. As a matter of fact, this is the only proper way to read these words, given a good grasp of Greek grammar and syntax.

The word "authority" is always, in Greek, the person's own authority, not someone else's. The phrase "have authority over" always means having power, freedom or authority over something. It never means, and indeed it simply cannot mean, having a "symbol" of someone else's authority on top of something. Recent commentators have recognized the power of this argument from good grammar but don't know what to do about it. I do. Let Paul speak for himself. What he says is simple enough. Women ought to have freedom to wear their hair however they want in church.

Does this seem so radical? Is it so odd and strange? Not at all! On the contrary, we have just seen that this point is exactly what Paul is arguing in verses 11-16. Once again, by reading from the bottom up, we have discovered the key to Paul's argument. Some Corinthians were insisting that women, when they pray or prophesy, should wear a kind of covering over their head. Paul is arguing against them, based on gender balance in Christ, on what is natural, and on consensus among other churches. Women ought to have the freedom to wear their hair as they see fit in the worship service. After all, nature has given women long hair instead of a covering—they don't need another one.

Who are the angels?

Paul gives two reasons that women ought to have freedom over their heads. The first part of this sentence, “for this reason” points us back to the sentences just prior to this verse. Since we are reading from the bottom up, we will come to them next. But Paul’s secondary reason is very obscure: “because of the angels.” What on earth do angels have to do with women’s covering? This brief reference, almost an aside, is so short and strange that we may never know what Paul meant by these words. Most of the time in the Bible, the Greek word *angelos* means a heavenly messenger, a supernatural being. An example of this is Gal. 1:8 where “an angel from heaven” is talking about a supernatural being. But on a few occasions, the word can mean a human being who is a messenger, for example Gal. 4:14: “you received me as a messenger [*angelos*] of God, as Christ Jesus.” In this case, since both Paul and Jesus are human beings, the messenger is probably human, too.

If we apply this meaning of *angelos* as a human messenger of God to 1 Cor. 11:10, then we might make sense of this phrase “because of the messengers (angels).” Women did have important roles in spreading the gospel in the early church. A good example of this would be Priscilla, who with her husband Aquila labored side-by-side to spread the gospel with Paul, even in Corinth (Acts 18). Should not such an “angel” have the freedom to wear her hair however she wishes in church? If this interpretation is correct, then “because of the messengers (of the gospel)” has about the same force as the argument from other churches in verse 16.

But suppose that this reading is rejected. As some scholars have pointed out, the word “angel” almost always means a supernatural being in Paul’s letters. It is also true that in 1 and 2 Corinthians, the word always means a supernatural being (outside of this verse). What could Paul mean by the phrase, “because of the angels,” if he was referring to a supernatural being? We can make some reasonable assumptions that will guide us in finding a good interpretation. Notice that this phrase is short and left without any fuller explanation. We can assume that the point would be one that was well known both to the Corinthian Christians and to Paul. Where can we look for teachings about angels that both the Corinthians and Paul had in common, which would provide background to understanding his comment? One source would be the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. Another source could be the letter that the Corinthians wrote to Paul. A third source might be Paul’s own teachings, the “traditions” that he handed down to his disciples (11:2). A final source would be the deeds and teachings of Jesus, which we can assume were also handed down in oral form. One of these is surely the source of this teaching, because Paul simply mentions it in passing.

Unfortunately, we do not possess the letters from the Corinthians to Paul. If we did, they would bring great light to our understanding of early Christianity and to Paul’s letter! What we do have are Paul’s own letters, which give

no indication of teaching anything about angels in the area of sex, gender, or family. There is, however, one passage out of the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) that does mention angels, women, and sex. This is the strange verse, Gen. 6:2, “The sons of God saw that they were fair, and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.” The Greek version of the Old Testament has “angels” instead of “sons of God.” On the basis of this verse, Tertullian argued that women should have a veil over their head, because angels may lust after them again.⁶ Frankly, despite my respect for Tertullian, this reading is absurd. In any case, Paul did not write that women should have a veil over their heads but that women should have freedom over their heads. Therefore, there is not much help in the Old Testament for understanding Paul’s reference to angels in 1 Corinthians 11.

In the sayings of Jesus, however, we may find some help. Paul has already referred to the sayings of Jesus in the context of sexual ethics in this letter. In chapter 7, he refers to Jesus’ teachings on divorce: “To the married I give charge—not I, but the Lord” (7:10). We have already seen, too, that in the next verse Paul will refer to our life “in the Lord.” Would it be so strange, then, if he was referring here to a saying of Jesus?

The saying in question is about marriage in the resurrection. In response to the questioning of some Sadducees, Jesus affirms that there will be no marriage in the resurrection. Rather, we shall be “like the angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). This saying is found in two other Gospels, Matthew 22:30 and Luke 20:36, and may well have been known to the Corinthians.⁷ Of the various sources we have to help us understand “because of the angels,” this saying of Jesus provides us with the most likely background.

Many scholars agree that some of the Corinthians, who sought after spiritual knowledge, already considered themselves “spiritual” people (1 Cor. 1:5, 3:1). They had in a spiritual sense already entered into the kingdom of God (4:8). They had already become “like the angels,” and things of the flesh were of no consequence to them. If this insight into Corinthian theology is correct, then we can see the force of Paul’s argument. If the Corinthians had already become “like the angels” then Paul was saying gender distinctions were of no importance. This is where the saying of the Lord comes in: Jesus teaches that in the resurrection sexuality as we know it will be no more. So sexual distinctions like hair coverings should, in the Lord, be of no importance. Therefore, “because of the angels” women should have authority over their heads. This at least makes the most sense to me, if one insists on viewing “angels” here as supernatural beings.

The more I think about “because of the angels,” the more convinced I am that the earlier theory is more probable. “Angels” in verse 10 probably refers to women who were messengers of God. The argument anticipates the one found in verse 16 later in the passage, and it makes good sense in the overall context of Paul’s argument.

After all, Adam is created out of the dust, but is hardly inferior to dirt!

Overall, deciding which of these two readings is correct is difficult to discern with rational certainty. I tend to favor the first interpretation, but the second one may be correct.

The chiasm

We can now press forward to the first reason Paul gives that women ought to have control over their own heads. Verse 10 begins, you will remember, with the phrase “for this reason.” This short phrase points us back to his earlier argument. To grasp the structure of the argument at this point, we need to look all the way back up to verse 7. Paul’s argument has a familiar structure called a “chiasm,” which is often found in the Bible. This is a passage with the structure, in general, of A, B, B*, A*. In this kind of structure, there is a movement in to a central point, and then a parallel movement back out from the center, touching upon the same themes in a new way. Paul’s argument, in verses 7-10, has the following structure:

- A. Man *ought* not to have his *head* covered
- B. Because he is in the image and *glory* of God.
- B.* But the woman is the *glory* of man [explication].
- A.* For this reason she *ought* to have freedom over her *head*.

To understand this argument and its structure better, we need to look at the entire passage.

(7a) For, on the one hand, a man ought not to have his head covered because he is the image and glory of God; (7b) but on the other hand, woman is the glory of man. (8) For man was not made from woman, but woman from man; (9) furthermore, man was not made because of woman but woman because of man. (10) For this reason, a woman ought to have freedom over her head.

Paul’s reason for arguing that women in Corinth ought to have freedom or control over their heads is straightforward: woman is the glory of man (v. 7b). Some commentators have twisted Paul’s word “glory” and tried to make it mean “reflection” (see the NRSV). Their arguments are more amusing than edifying, however, and have little value as careful exegesis. Paul’s word here just means glory and cannot be reduced to some lesser status. If we pay attention to Paul’s own words, then he must be saying something positive about woman. After all, this is the reason that Corinthian women ought to have freedom over their own bodies.

In a long parenthesis in his chiasmic argument, Paul appeals to the story of Genesis 1-2. Man alone was “not good” (Gen. 2:18). This is in fact the first not good thing in the Bible, all other things being “very good.” The woman was created out of man, as the crowning glory of the creation story, and as the succor of the male. The Hebrew word for “helper” does not indicate help from an inferior, but from a superior (or equal) person. It is often used to describe help from God, for example. So “helper” in English does not convey the force of the Hebrew noun. “Succor” is better, because it indicates that Eve is an equal

partner for Adam (in the Hebrew text), not just a servant or gardener. Notice, for example, that the *man* leaves his family and *clings to the woman* (Gen. 2:24). It is true that woman is created out of man. But this is her glory, according to Paul, not an indication of inferior status (as too many interpreters have argued). After all, Adam is created out of the dust, but is hardly inferior to dirt! No, the story tends to go from the lesser to the more glorious in Genesis 1-2. Paul understood this point and wrote that “woman is the glory of man . . . because woman was created out of man.” Paul immediately shifts from this argument to creation, however, to argue that “in the Lord” such distinctions have been overcome (vv. 11-12). Paul is more comfortable with gender balance (cf. 1 Cor. 7 and Gal. 3), than with one sex being more glorious than the other.

But what did Paul mean when he wrote (v. 7a), “For, on the one hand, a man ought not to be covered because he is in the image and glory of God”? Was Paul teaching that only the male is in the image and glory of God? Paying attention to the whole passage, we discover that this sentence is not Paul’s own view but his description of a Corinthian view. This sentence is not Paul’s own theology, as careful attention to the rest of this passage makes clear (vv. 7b-16). Paul in fact rejects the idea that the male alone was “heavenly” or in the image and glory of God. Such theology will later make its way into some Gnostic-influenced writings in the ancient world.⁸ Paul’s opponents in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 may have been early followers of some concepts that, a century later, become part of Gnostic thought.⁹ In any case, the point of Paul’s argument is to *refute* the view that the male alone was fit to inherit the kingdom of God. This idea is the key theological root of the Corinthian custom, a theological concept that troubled Paul enough to include hairstyle among the topics of this letter.

Criticism of the Corinthians

We now have the key that will unlock the mysteries of 11:4-7a. Paul uses strange language here, so strange that some modern scholars have argued that he could not have written it. However, when we understand that these sentences are describing the Corinthian situation, we see his language in a whole new light.¹⁰ For one thing, it explains Paul’s strange use of vague Greek words to describe the covering custom of the Corinthians.

Paul’s description of their customs and theology is *not* neutral. On the contrary, he describes their views in such a way as implicitly to criticize them. The Corinthians held that when women prayed or prophesied in the church, they should wear a kind of shawl, which they pulled up over the back of their heads. It was common to insist, in Roman culture, that those who participate in the worship of the gods cover their heads in this way when they bring an offering.¹¹ This covering, then, was not for normal attendance at church, but just for those women who were leading church services.

According to the Corinthians, the men, on the other hand, should wear their hair short when they attend church, especially when they are church leaders. Long hair

Breaking down cultural hierarchy

on men was seen as barbaric in Greek and Roman culture during this period. In particular, male church leaders should come to worship with short hair.

Paul correctly describes this custom in terms of cultural control, especially *shame*. He takes great pains to create a parallel description of this Corinthian custom for men and women, in keeping with the gender balance he will insist upon. By describing this custom in a way that is parallel for women and men, Paul sets up his later rejection of it. "Any (Corinthian) man who prays or prophesies with something coming down from his head shames his head. But any (Corinthian) woman who prays or prophesies without something coming down from her head shames her head." Paul uses the same terms in Greek for the covering of male and female for a simple purpose. He chose words that were vague enough to cover both long hair on men and the shawl-like covering for women, in order to bring out the parallel situation for both women and men. His ultimate purpose is to reject this custom he is describing. Hairstyle for men played a part in the Corinthian customs, but the key problem is no doubt the women, since he spends much more space on them. His description continues: "It is the same as if she were shaved." Here we see the Corinthian idea (hardly found only in Corinth!) that long hair is glorious on a woman. Paul specifically rejects this cultural viewpoint later in the passage (v. 15). Not wearing the proper covering over her head while leading a church service is just as culturally bad, just as shameful, as having her glorious, long hair cut off: so the Corinthians believed. Paul then goes on to exaggerate their viewpoint, for the purpose of making fun of it.

"For if a woman will not cover herself, she should cut off her hair; but if it is shameful for a woman to cut off her hair, let her cover it." This sentence reminds one of a similar one in Galatians. The Book of Galatians refutes the custom of circumcision for Gentile men who converted to Christianity. Paul wrote, "I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves" (Gal. 5:12). If Paul's opponents at Galatia are so in favor of circumcision, he chides, why not go all the way? But of course Paul does not really want them to be castrated. Likewise, he does not want the Corinthian women to have their hair cut off. In both places, he uses sarcastic exaggeration to poke fun at a custom he is opposing. Paul in fact was seeking to liberate the church from both circumcision and head covering.

This does leave us with a good question. If it was common in Roman culture to cover one's head during the worship of the gods, why did the men not have to cover their heads? The Corinthian answer was straightforward: the male (alone) is in the image and glory of God (v. 7a). Therefore the male does not need to cover his head in the presence of God the way a woman does. Paul's counter-argument is that, on the other hand, woman is the glory of man. As such, she should have freedom over her head, that is, freedom to wear her hair as she sees fit in the worship of God.

Reading from the bottom up, this leaves us with the first two verses (the last two we will examine). Paul begins this passage, "I praise you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you. And I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." There are several remaining puzzles in this beginning to our passage. We will discover that having read the passage backwards we are in a good position to understand Paul's words.

Why does Paul commend the Corinthians here? He does so nowhere else in this letter. The reason, probably, is that they were boasting of holding on to the theology ("traditions") that Paul had taught them. Never mind that they grossly misunderstood and abused them! Paul will, tongue in cheek, praise them at this point. The "praise" that he gives them in this verse, however, only sets up the "I do not praise you" of verse 17 in the next passage.

The Corinthians claimed that they were only following the teachings that Paul had handed on to them. And what were these teachings? The next verse tells us. God is the "head" of Christ, Christ is the "head" of man, and man is the "head" of woman. The word "head" in Greek, when not used to refer to the thing on top of our neck, has a variety of metaphorical meanings. These can be summarized under the notion of being first in some way.¹² Sometimes, being first or uppermost might mean having a kind of authority. At other times, being first might mean being at the start, or being a source. These multiple meanings, then, provide a theological foundation for the Corinthian custom.

Paul begins to break up their hierarchy, even in the way he describes it. This three-part "headship" sentence is not written in descending order. Paul purposefully broke up the top-down thinking of his opponents, even in the description of their ideas. He begins his description with "I want you to know." This phrase, and its equivalent "I don't want you to be ignorant," were cliché in Greek letter writing in Paul's time. He uses this cliché in an ironic way throughout 1 Corinthians 10-12. In all three cases, he in fact wanted to correct the Corinthians on an area they *thought* they already knew better than Paul! In 1 Cor. 10:1 he reminds them of the story of Moses, but of course they already knew such "elementary" things (cf. 1 Cor. 4:10). In 12:1, he corrects them in the area of spiritual gifts, again a place where they were already "experts" (cf. 1 Cor. 1:5). Likewise here in 11:3, the phrase "I want you to know" is used in an ironic manner. Paul is simply repeating back to the Corinthians their own views, under his description. This sets up his correction of their theology in 11:7b-16.

Just what was the meaning of the three-part headship formula? The sense of "head" in this passage is that of being first in time, or being the origin. The idea of authority is foreign to this verse. By reading from the bottom up, we already know that Paul will talk about who comes first in time, man or woman. So we have a good clue as to the meaning of "head" in this verse. Paul must have

taught them that Christ came from God (the origin of Christ is God). Likewise, Paul must have taught them that Christ is the origin of the church, but the Corinthians had restricted the “headship” of Christ to the male alone (the head of man is Christ, cf. v. 7a). Finally, Paul and the Bible taught that woman was created out of man (the origin of woman is man). The theology of verse 3 was used as the basis for the head covering custom of verses 4-6.

By reading this passage from the bottom up and paying attention to Paul’s own words, we have discovered the most reasonable interpretation of 11:2-16. We have in fact discovered that this passage has, in general, the same structure as the discussion of food sacrificed to idols in 1 Cor. 8. In both passages we find allusions, perhaps even direct quotations, from the Corinthian letter. In both passages, Paul describes the theology and custom of the Corinthians before he goes on to reject it. But how do we know for certain that 8:1-6 and 11:2-7 represent Corinthian theology and practices that are not Paul’s own? There are four signs that point in this direction.

1. Paul immediately rejects this theology and practice in the larger context of his argument.
2. The phrases that we think come from the Corinthian letter give theological support to the practice Paul is rejecting.
3. The phrases that we think come from the Corinthian letter are strange coming from Paul: they are un-Pauline in their language and thought.
4. This theology and practice fits in with what we know (from other places) about Paul’s opponents in Corinth, or more generally, his correspondents.

On all four of these tests, 11:3-7a turns out to be Corinthian, not Pauline. Paul taught that Christ was the head of the church, not head of the male. Paul taught that all people were from God, not that the male was in the image and glory of God. Paul consistently rejected such local customs (like hairstyles in worship) that could upset local people but inhibit liberty in Christ.

In conclusion

Careful and thoughtful attention to Paul’s own words, and to the type of letter he wrote (i.e., one which cites the views of his opponents) have yielded a surprising result. We can finally grasp the logic of Paul’s argument in 11:2-16 in a way that makes sense of each part of the passage, of the passage as a whole, and of its place in the letter. What more can we ask of a proposed interpretation? I conclude, therefore, that by reading from the bottom up we have discovered the most likely interpretation of this passage. This reading is much more in keeping with everything we know about Paul, his theology, his common practice, and his ethical thinking. We discover, in fact, that Paul was seeking to give greater liberty to men and women in Christ. Paul was only interested in hairstyles because the Corinthian custom he was rejecting was based upon aberrant theology. Paul rejected the notion that the male alone is in the image and glory of God, insisting that

woman was the glory of man and as such ought to have freedom over her head. ■



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Notes

1. See the following articles: A. G. Padgett, “Feminism in First Corinthians.” *Evangelical Quarterly*. 58 (1986), 121-132; idem, “Paul on Women in the Church: The Contradictions of Coiffure in 1 Corinthians 11.2-16.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. 20 (1984), 69-86; and idem., “The Significance of anti in 1 Corinthians 11:15.” *Tyndale Bulletin*. 45 (1991), 181-187.
2. See Padgett, “Significance.”
3. See Katharine Bushnell, *God’s Word to Women*. 3rd ed. Oakland, CA: Private publication, 1930. [reprint available from CBE].
4. Following W. A. Orr and J. A. Walther, *1 Corinthians* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 261. I conclude that the Greek word *oude* (“neither”) that starts this sentence was meant to be two words: *ou* (“not”) and *de* (“but”).
5. The most important translation of the Bible in Western history, the Latin Vulgate, does translate this as a statement, not a question. The Latin language, unlike the Greek, uses certain words or suffixes to indicate when a question is being asked. None of these are present in the Latin translation of 11:13-15. The Latin gets it right! I owe this point to my friend the Rev. Dr. Richard Sturch.
6. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, vii; “On the Veiling of Virgins,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (1885; rpt. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pubs., 1994), 32. Tertullian (fl. 200 A.D.) was an important North African early Christian apologist and theologian.
7. See S. Scott Bartchy, *Mallon Chresai* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Pr., 1973).
8. See for example, the *Gospel of Thomas*, saying 114; or the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, par. 25 & 40; see also Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, tr. R. Mc. Wilson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 257, 270-272.
9. That Paul’s opponents were influenced by theology that would later develop into Gnosticism (with many other factors included) is widely believed by many modern commentators.
10. See Samuel T. Lowrie, “I Corinthians XI and the Ordination of Women as Ruling Elders,” *Princeton Theological Review*. 19 (1921): 113-130.
11. See David W. J. Gill “The Importance of Roman Portraiture for Head Coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.” *Tyndale Bulletin*. 41 (1990): 245-260.
12. See A. C. Perriman, “The Head of Woman.” *Journal of Theological Studies*. 45 (1994): 602-622. Scholars have rightly rejected arguments that the metaphorical use of “head” in Greek never means authority.