On Whether 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 Allows an Egalitarian Exegesis

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An unfortunate history of misinterpretation and abuse has surrounded 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. It has been taken out of context and used to suppress women's involvement in the ministry of the church. The egalitarian interpretation, however, finally perceives this verse, not as a tool of oppression, but as one with a helpful cross-cultural message. At the outset of my paper I will disclose the three most prominent complementarian objections to an egalitarian interpretation: (1) the hierarchy Paul describes in v. 3 lays out a subordinating chain of command, (2) the word "authority" in verse 10 takes a passive meaning and thereby refers to the husband's authority over the wife, and (3) that while women do not have to wear head coverings today they still need to pray and prophesy in a manner that is submissive to male leadership in the church.

My desire to separate these objections from the body of my article is for the sake of clarity. The body of the study will focus on the egalitarian interpretation only, which I will demonstrate can be fully justified from the text itself. Although there are certainly disagreements between egalitarians, the thrust of my presentation will consider these rather than attempt to create a dialogue between them and complementarian approaches.

Before coming to the body of the text I make two arguments from authority. First, I note that Galatians 3:27–28 serves to remind us that in Christ distinctions based on gender are irrelevant. The second is a reminder of the evangelical commitment to the infallibility of Scripture. I take Galatians 3:28 as the starting point for all interpretations of passages pertaining to men and women's relationship. The heart of the article will discuss the world behind the text, first of all, to clarify the author, audience, historical circumstances, and social and cultural considerations. The world of the text, where I will clearly show the egalitarian interpretation, focuses on the literary context, structure, flow of the argument, situational context, main concerns, and key words. Lastly, the world in front of the text helps us clarify how this pericope can be reapplied to our own understanding and faith in light of our own cultural considerations. This passage does not make a universal command for the use of head coverings for women and it certainly does not set up a hierarchical relationship for men and women. Paul does, in fact, establish three helpful themes for the church: first, Paul wishes the Corinthian church to be united in body and spirit,

second, for its members to be willing to compromise spiritual freedoms for the sake of other believers, and, third, that some actions within a given culture can shame fellow believers and God and should therefore be avoided.

Objection 1

Most complementarians believe that in verse three the meaning of "head" is synonymous with "authority" and therefore a functional hierarchy of men over women is established. One author gives three main reasons for his claim. The first is that when kephalē appears elsewhere in the New Testament it is most often synonymous with "authority," and indisputably so according to another. The second is that, in the LXX (Septuagint), kephalē never takes the meaning of "source"; therefore, since Paul is very familiar with the LXX, it is unlikely that he would use kephalē in that way. The third reason is that the meaning "source" is nonsensical in passages such as Ephesians 5:22.1

Objection 2

In verse ten exousia takes a passive meaning and therefore the NASB, RSV, and NIV translations are correct in inserting "symbol," "veil," and "sign" respectively. Thus, the authority on the head of a woman is not in reference to herself but to her spiritual head or husband.2 And The Living Bible translates it most correctly with "so a woman should wear a covering on her head as a sign that she is under man's authority."3

Objection 3

The application for today's church, although not requiring women to wear a veil, does require women to pray and prophesy in a manner that submits to the male leadership of the church because of the universal gender roles established by the creation order.4

On the contrary, Galatians 3:27–28 teaches: "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.5 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."6 As difficult as it often is, the evangelical commitment to the Bible forces the reader to look beyond apparent contradictions and to affirm the validity and soundness of the Bible as a whole. Scripture is infallible. Therefore, Paul's writings will not be contradictory. This passage in Galatians lays a solid foundation, which other texts do not ignore.

I answer that when a proper and thorough exegesis, with attention to the world behind, of, and in front of the text, is complete, it will reflect the egalitarian view and not contradict other biblical passages such as Galatians 3:28 as cited. The world behind the text reveals the authorship, audience, historical circumstances, and social and cultural considerations. It is into this framework that the text itself is laid. Beginning the exegetical process here is imperative, because understanding the

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contemporary meaning requires us to be aware of our own social and cultural considerations, as we become the new audience.

There are seven letters in the New Testament that all scholars have recognized as Paul's: 1 Corinthians, along with 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, and Philemon. However, some have doubted Paul's authorship of the passage at hand because it seems to contradict some of Paul's other passages. They then dismiss it as an interpolation. The argument is extremely weak, but is worth mentioning. Rather than give up hopelessly, the other side is that we can acknowledge the difficulty, but carefully overcome the problem by proper exegesis. Therefore, I will move forward, affirming the claim of Paul's authorship for the whole letter including chapter 11.

Paul's letter was written to believers at Corinth. It was a city of a rich and convoluted history, first as a flourishing Greek city-state, and then it was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BCE, to be founded again by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. Because of its location on the isthmus connecting the Peloponnesse and the mainland, it was on an important trade route both for land and sea connecting Rome to the East. It was repopulated by freedmen—people in the social class just above a slave—from Rome, which had an abundance of these potential troublemakers. At the same time it gave these people the opportunity to start afresh together and make their own way. They were helped considerably by the strategic trade location that immediately brought money to the city. As Gordon Fee notes, "As often happens in such centers, vice and religion flourished side by side...All of this evidence together suggests that Paul's Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world."10

Paul probably founded the church around 51–52 CE11 and composed the letter about three years later.12 Paul's specific audience would be chiefly gentiles, who were probably not wealthy;13 However, Paul's churches generally had a combination of socioeconomic levels and they may have met in the homes of the few wealthy members of the congregation.14 This probability could be particularly important to our discussion because division among the Corinthian congregation may well have been linked to socioeconomic differences. Overall, the first letter to the Corinthians has a unifying message for a church overcome with disputes and disunity.15

In chapter 11 there is disunity, among certain ones, concerning head coverings in worship. The NIV commentary points out that some may be over-exercising their freedom and thereby blurring gender lines. A favorite view among commentators recently is that the problem was a result of the atypical freedom women experienced in the church. Paul does not forbid their participation, but instructs them how to behave properly.17 We know that Paul seeks to remedy some disruptive behavior which is occurring in the context of praying and prophesying.

Paul may be concerned that this disruptive behavior is sending the wrong cultural messages that would hinder the spread of the Gospel.18 Or, perhaps, the messages could hinder the faith of other believers in their church. This pericope fits into a string of passages that all carry the same basic advice, starting with chapter 8. This advice is that, while believers may have a certain right (in this case, eating meat in chapter 8), they should abstain if it causes a weaker believer to stumble. Paul says in chapter 9 that he has a right to collect money from the church, but he refuses to do so for the sake of those who are weak in the faith, and who do not yet understand. While the Corinthian women might have the spiritual right to disregard head coverings, for the sake of the culture or the church body they should wear them.

Let me clarify some of the possible messages an uncovered head could send in the larger cultural framework of the 1st century. The untraditional length of hair could suggest homosexual behavior.19 An uncovered head could signal adulterous behavior, as it did to the east of Corinth.20 Married women in that society tended to keep their hair up, whereas unmarried women, especially those seeking husbands, left their hair down.21 Extravagant hairdos may have connected the church members to the Sophists.22 If Paul had in mind a material covering, the disuse could link them to Roman religious groups.23 The Greek religious life, however, did not command head coverings for either male or female.24

Keener dismisses most of these possibilities as unlikely for various reasons25 or says the cultural considerations are irrelevant.26 But the general message is clear: presenting oneself in a certain inappropriate way disgraces God and hinders the spread of the Gospel.27 Because we are not able to determine precisely what Paul aspires to combat in terms of the general cultural situation, however, such speculation may not prove fruitful to understanding Paul's counsel anyway. Surely I do not mean that Paul is not concerned about the presentation of the church to its culture, but the primary goal of his whole letter is for a unified body as laid out in his thesis statement (1 Cor. 1:10).28 The Corinthians have enough problems in their own church that demand attention before they can appear united to the broader culture of Corinth when spreading the Gospel teaching. Evangelism becomes a secondary concern of Paul's at this point.

Paul certainly understands the cultural situation of Corinth and the broader 1st Century culture. Again, more likely than responding to a cultural situation between believers and unbelievers, Paul's message is for the sake of those in the church because his argument flows forth from the preceding passages. Paul's first concern is for church unity; its members' effective evangelistic outreach will begin once the many issues they encounter begin the process of resolution.

The rhetorical structure, according to Mitchell, might disagree with my claim. She classifies 5:1–11:1 as the "Second section of proof: The integrity of the Corinthian community against outside defilement." Advice on divisive issues within the group

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It seems that Keener agrees with this standpoint, as I shift to the text itself. He claims that the main concern of this passage is that “one should not bring reproach upon one's family or upon the Christian gospel; one should not seek to destroy symbolic gender distinctions by pioneering unisex clothing styles; and one should respect custom and do one's best to avoid causing someone to stumble.” The main concern is also applicable transculturally, a point to which I will return. Paul's instruction, in its situational context, is that it appears as though some women are stretching their belief too far eschatologically, which has led them to disregard gender distinctions completely. In their newfound spiritual life they may have believed they became as the angels and no longer had to ascribe to gender distinctions.

The letter can be broken down into four main arguments with verse two as the opening remarks: “the order of the home [vv. 3–6], the order of creation [vv. 7–12], the order of nature itself [13–15], and church custom [v. 16].” Fee, however, divides it into three principle arguments, combining verse two into the argument from the home, with the last verse considered in with the argument from nature. I prefer Keener's division mostly because the separation of v. 16 allows it to be Paul's concluding remarks on the matter and enough difference is present from vv. 13–15. Fee points out that the thrust of this passage is always directed toward the women of the congregation and more particularly their own heads.

The introductory verse begins with praise (epainō de humas) and with a goal to move the recipients toward appropriate behavior. In this way Paul is preparing them for the critical instruction he will give so that they take it receptively. The first argument is structured by two analogies in which Paul moves kephalē from a literal to a metaphorical sense. It is also important to point out that to solve the problem in the Corinthian church, Paul uses a metaphor, and therefore does not lay down a universal command which is applicable cross-culturally. And he sets the command forth in a way that by doing something (not covering the head) a woman would bring about shame on herself and on her spouse. Ultimately, Paul uses a *reductio ad absurdum*, arguing that, if a woman wishes to show her head off so much, she may as well shave her head. Nowhere in the passage is Paul's command directed towards men. There is also no mention of authority in the text (except for a woman's over her own head); if authority were to be understood in that way, it would have to be read into the text. Furthermore, woman is not the subject of man, but rather his glory (found in Paul's second argument).

Perhaps the most controversial verse of the whole section is v. 3 where Paul deploys this metaphor. Fee makes an impressive argument for understanding *kephalē* as synonymous with “source,” which he builds from the context itself. I understand this verse as three predicate nominatives separated by commas and the conjunction (de). They are predicate nominatives because each clause has two nouns in the nominative case and is controlled by *eimi* (to be). Colwell's rule informs us that the nominative modified by the genitive is to be taken as the primary subject of the sentence when both nouns are articular. Therefore, this translation follows: "But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, but the head of woman is man, but the head of Christ is God." Fee takes this metaphor relationally rather than hierarchically. In the second clause, head most probably means “source.” This is clear and fits the context of vv. 7c–9 where woman is man's glory and also in vv. 8 and 12 in the context of creation where Adam is the source of Eve. In terms of the first clause, which is more difficult to subscribe to the meaning “source,” there are two possibilities: Christ is the creator of every man or Christ is the means to each man's new creation through salvation. The final clause fits with v. 12, where Paul reminds us that God is the source of all things.

Until encountering Fee's commentary, I was unconvinced of “head” being synonymous with “source.” Now I particularly agree with his derivative of the concept of shame governing the first argument. However, I would like to push this further than Fee does, which I have argued elsewhere even though it has no direct correlation to the text at hand. I advocated a definition of shame as the “knowledge of something lost,” which was also Adam and Eve's response to their sin on a twofold level: they knew they had lost unity with God (demonstrated in their attempt to hide) and with each other (in the desire to cover their nakedness). Christ, in taking a shameful death, thereby meets the fallen world at the point of our shame to give us back the unity (or glory) that was lost in the fall. This may not be Paul's line of thinking in the context of 1 Corinthians, but I think theologically the claim could be justified. The theological point is that by bringing shame on her husband, by the act of not covering her head, a wife thereby shames herself, her husband, and God; and, therefore, she is reversing the work of Christ, which had removed that shame.

Shame is often juxtaposed with pride, but the medium is glory, which we find in the heart of Paul's second argument. This argument is a further clarification of the first one. Paul shows that woman is the glory of man by referencing Genesis 2 in vv. 8–9. Paul is fully aware that the actions of the wife in that culture can bring about shame or glory upon her husband. There is no directive for woman to be subordinate in this section and Paul
Our first concern as a church body should be for unity.

The three arguments cited at the outset of this article ultimately lead to one very weak argument: the meaning of kephalē in other passages from both testaments almost always means “authority” and can vary rarely, without several arguments, mean “source.” The foremost problem with an argument like this is that it has no linguistic conscience. As Max Turner notes, “The sense of a word is (by definition) the (usually minimal) linguistic bundle of meaning regarded as linguistically necessary to, or conventionally strongly associated with, a word.” In other words, the meaning of a word cannot be formulated from other uses of that word because each word is conditioned by its own usage and context. Further, even if I allow the previously cited complementarian’s argument, I still see problems with his reasoning. His second claim given, referring to the LXX, remarks that there are no uses of kephalē relating the idea of “source.” However, Fee points out that in the LXX and in Greek literature it is rare to find the meaning “authority.” Any time when rosh, the Hebrew word for head, was used metaphorically to mean “authority,” it was usually translated as “leader” or “ruler” in the LXX. This demonstrates that kephalē generally does not take a metaphorical meaning. Within its own context 1 Corinthians 11:3 does take on a metaphorical meaning and it is not a pericope that focuses itself on the subordination of women, as I have argued above. In addition to that observation, I appeal to Genesis 2:24 and must point out that, if husband and wife truly become one flesh, there is no need to establish a hierarchy of authority.

also makes no mention of head coverings. The only authority mentioned in the passage is found in v. 10: *dia touto ophieilehē gunē exousian echein epi tēs kephalēs.* Thus, this should be read: “woman ought to have authority upon (her) head.” That is followed by the confusing phrase “on account of the angels.” Meeks says, concerning this phrase, “no one knows what this means, though many guesses have been offered.” Given this observation, I wish to digress into its meaning no further. Verses 11–12 contrast with vv. 8–9, bringing Paul’s argument full circle so that vv. 8–9 are not misconstrued in such a way to lead to hierarchical behavior. Because of man and woman’s mutual dependency for life on each other and on God, it is wrong to assert that woman exists only for man’s purposes. God has established creation in such a way that neither can exist without the other, which is a concept broader than just marriage as it includes the context of church worship, for the sake of fellowship. The second argument attempts to persuade the Corinthian woman into choosing a wardrobe that will honor their husbands. While she has the full right to dress as she pleases, she is encouraged to give up this right for the sake of her husband’s, and possibly the church’s, honor. For this reason, Keener understands this passage in reference to the message of chapters 8–10 flowing with the same message, as I too am proposing.

Furthermore, Paul’s third argument (vv. 13–15) is an appeal to nature, concerning the created order. It is also an appeal to the Corinthians concerning their proper judgment of propriety. Again, as to the whole, this particular argument is directed at the women themselves. It reminds the women that they should dress in a manner that does not blur gender distinctions because gender distinctions exist in nature no matter what kind of eschatology the women believe to be true. Verse 13 contains the first of two rhetorical questions, the first one expecting a negative answer. The second question is found in vv. 14–15 and is expecting an affirmative answer. Verse 15 seems to clarify the whole object of his argument when Paul says that “long hair has been given to her instead of a veil,” by using the word (anti). This word usually means instead of, or in place of, but Fee asserts that there is evidence that it does not need to be taken in the strictest sense of exchange. I think that in this case it does take such a meaning because that exchange is further clarified in v. 16, “we have no such custom nor do the churches of God,” to be in reference to the use of head coverings. There is no universal command for head coverings, but in this particular church they are required to do so on behalf of other believers.

Separating the last verse as its own argument is necessary because the argument shifts from nature to church custom, where Paul says that the churches of God have no custom and, if some wish to be argumentative, they surely can come to the conclusion that head coverings are not required. This is Paul’s conclusion for the entire section, yet that does not mean what preceded was useless. While the women certainly do not need head coverings to pray and prophesy, Paul’s three main themes

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Reply to Objection 2

The Living Bible translation was clearly replaced when The New Living Bible was published, for the translation now reflects the NASB, RSV, and NIV. Also, Fee points out that nowhere does exousia take on a passive rendition as it is translated in those versions. Finally, Fee notes, “There is no known evidence... that the idiom ‘to have authority over’ ever refers to an external authority different from the subject of the sentence.”

Reply to Objection 3

If we are to take the command to wear a head covering as non-literal, how are we to understand as literal the metaphorical hierarchy Paul uses to argue that women should wear head coverings? I have mentioned several times that subordination has to be read into this text because there is no justification for it within the text. The only authority mentioned is women’s own authority over her own head in v. 10.

The common theme of the complementarian understanding of this passage begins from a presupposition of subordination. Rudolf Bultmann reminds us that exegesis cannot be done without presuppositions, and surely mine are egalitarian by nature. Still, I think the text itself clearly allows an egalitarian exegesis far more so than a complementarian one that needs to read one’s presupposition of subordination into the text. I may start as an egalitarian, but mine is a warranted reading at least on the basis of this passage. While this passage is not as important for Paul as the passage to follow concerning the Lord’s Supper, we seem to be fixated on it as of late. This can cloud our vision on real problems of abusive practice that are far more serious. It is important to be aware of the complementarian and egalitarian debate, but unless the disagreement becomes largely divisive, there are more pressing problems that face the church that need immediate attention. Let us not proceed in a divisive spirit, but in one of full equality so that the Gospel is not hindered.

**All translations of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, unless mentioned otherwise, are my own. All other scriptural references NRSV.

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**Notes**

2. Ibid., 126–127.
4. Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity,” 129.
5. Although metaphorical language, Paul’s focus on being clothed with Christ is significant in light of the discussion of head coverings in 1 Cor. 11:2–16.
7. There are other passages such as 1 Cor. 14:34–35, 1 Tim. 2:9–15, etc. that require a proper egalitarian interpretation, and such interpretations have been given, although I will not be dealing with the exegetical issues surrounding those texts in this paper.
10. Fee, NICOT, 2–3.
11. Ibid., 4.
12. Q. M. Adams, Neither Male nor Female: A Study of the Scriptures (Elms Court: Arthur H. Stockwell LTD, 1973), 188. On the contrary to Fee, Adams suggests it was probably written in 57 CE, also three years after its founding. There seems to me a good chance Adams is dated.
15. Fee, NICOT, 4–5. Our number puts it first, but it may not be Paul’s first letter to the church.
22. Ibid. A philosophical group often looked down on by the society for their excessive argumentation and exploitation of common people.
23. Ibid., 211.
26. Ibid., 28.
27. Blomberg, NIV Application Commentary, 211.
29. Ibid., 185.
30. Ibid.
31. Although the “purpose” he mentions could be evangelistic by nature.
33. Ibid., 19.
34. Fee, NICOT, 494.
37. Fee, NICOT, 501.
38. Ibid., 495.
40. Fee, NICOT, 502.
42. Fee, NICOT, 502.
44. Ibid., 65.
45. Fee, NICOT, 503.
46. I had been debating about leaving this paragraph in the body of the article or putting it in the endnotes.
   I realize that it is more theological than exegetical, but I believe it helps the overall argument, so I left it in the article.
48. Fee, NICOT, 495.
50. Fee, NICOT, 495.
51. Ibid., 523.
53. Ibid., 38.
54. Ibid., 42.
55. Fee, NICOT, 495.
57. Fee, NICOT, 525.
58. Ibid., 529.
60. Ibid., 45.
61. Fee, NICOT, 530.
62. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 172. Turner goes on to argue that head most likely means “authority” rather than “source.” But he also says that the case would need to be made within the context of the passage as he says Fee has possibly done, and I believe he has.
65. Fee, NICOT, 519.

“Prosperity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.” Psalm 22:30–31

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