

# Re-Oranting the Church: Metaphor and the Erasure of Image-Bearing

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One of the more subtle consequences of the Reformation is the way iconoclasm shaped our ability to recognize the metaphors of Scripture. Protestants in the Western church are often not very good at thinking in images, preferring instead the conceptual logic of texts and tending to ignore the implicit. This in turn can lead to being blind to interpretive possibilities suggested by biblical imagery.

To understand what I mean, consider first this line from Shakespeare's *Othello*: "Put out the light, and then put out the light."<sup>1</sup>

This may be the most disturbing bit of dialogue in the play. It works because the simple repetition of four common words conveys two very distinct meanings, one literal and the other metaphorical: first Othello will snuff out the candle in his bedroom, then he'll strangle Desdemona in bed. These two meanings are completely transparent to the audience, which is what makes the ensuing action so packed with tension. We see the killing coming, but we're powerless to stop it. The literal and metaphorical meanings work together to advance the story.

This is also how we process life. We use metaphors every day, often unconsciously, to understand the world and each other. Metaphors work by joining distinct things that don't at first seem to be connected. They aren't similes. They don't say that one thing is *like* another. Metaphors claim that one thing *is* another thing—and usually a very different sort of thing. A man's home *is* his castle. Time *is* money. Life *is* a roller coaster.

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Metaphors are useful because they help us understand realities that aren't obvious by filtering them through the characteristics and nuances of something else. In writing, "his fists were clubs," for instance, an author can import the violence and cruelty of a blunt weapon into the personality of a character. The result is not just a physical description of strength, but the invisible aspects of brutality and domination that are overlaid onto the character's humanity.

In other words, metaphor is a powerful way of conveying depth through association, and in particular the association of imagery. This is why I believe our Protestant heritage of iconoclasm, or image-breaking, is still impacting our ability to understand Scripture even when we lament the statue-smashing, tapestry-tearing, stained-glass window-shattering history of the iconoclasts. Consequently, we tend to be blind to certain theological images that make sense of passages which are typically unpacked through textual assumptions that are

incomplete or inaccurate. This essay will focus on one example, the role of the female orant, or praying person, in understanding Paul's instructions about head coverings in 1 Corinthians and what his imagery means to us today.

## The Legacy of the Reformation

In prioritizing text over images, the Reformers fractured not just the stained glass and statuary of the medieval church, but the essential nature of our contemporary imagination. While it's true that many Protestant denominations have retained aspects of symbolic imagery in their liturgical practice, church architecture, and clerical tradition, still it is evident that, as a whole, we've made the gospel a matter of conceptual truth and downplayed the importance of embodied truth. We've said that the story had to be conveyed through text, and through text alone, and thereby have elevated one type of symbolic meaning over every other type of symbolic meaning. When we replaced the sanctuary altar with a pulpit, we did more than highlight the importance of Scripture; we prioritized words over images—and we've been doing so ever since.

Even when we do recognize metaphorical thinking in the Bible, it is often in ways that point to propositional truths rather than to concrete images. For instance, the Greek word for "head," *kephalē*, can—though not as commonly as in English—be used metaphorically to mean authority. (Think "head of household" on your tax forms.) That it can be used to mean a literal human noggin while simultaneously pointing to a deeper truth—"head over heels," for example—doesn't seem to occur to us. At least, it doesn't occur to us when we interpret the Bible.

Instead, our theology is driven by propositions and doctrines that, however true, are often difficult to imagine. Try to picture *righteousness by faith*, for instance, or the *infallibility of Scripture*, or even something as simple as *grace*. You'll end up scratching your *kephalē*. Like the first phase of creation, concepts are always formless and void—and we seem to like it that way. Since the Reformation, it's nearly impossible to use St. Patrick's three-leaf clover analogy as a picture of the Trinity without someone helpfully pointing out that a shamrock's leaves are distinct *parts* while the Godhead consists of distinct *persons*. "All analogies break down," someone will say, as if this obviously means that analogies are therefore pointless.

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Or take *penal substitutionary atonement*; what precisely does this mean to us today apart from Jesus on the cross? The answer may be found in thousands of complex and theologically sound sermons, none of which will ever approach the power of crucifixion imagery. Yet we continue to prioritize the exposition of the gospel story over its experiential nature as a story. Deep concepts may be summarized through text, but capturing their nature requires embodiment. And it is this embodiment that many—though not all—evangelical traditions have failed to explore.

Consequently, and perhaps not without some justification, our theology tends to be oriented around the particularizing linguistics of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. We miss the synthesizing nuances of metaphor and metonym that require indirect association. We miss these connections because whenever we encounter a difficult text in the Bible, our primary explanatory filter is the words themselves, not how those words create layers of meaning. So we turn first to the original text; then reluctantly to its historic and cultural context; then, perhaps in desperation, to doctrinal principles. (*We know Paul was talking about authority here, right? So that must be what this is about. Head equals “boss.” Got it.*) Rarely do we ponder other possibilities related to Scriptural metaphors—even though Jesus himself prioritized the use of metaphor in his teachings.

I can’t say with any certainty why do we do this, but I suspect it’s because we’ve been indoctrinated into a distrust of images, and that distrust is so deep and unconscious that we extend it even to the source of imaging, our own imaginations. I suspect that iconoclasm has distorted our ability to think like the early Christians.

#### Head Coverings and the Orant

Nowhere is this absence of metaphorical theology more apparent than in our ubiquitous puzzlement over Paul’s instructions about head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11:3.

But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. (1 Cor 11:3–5 NIV)

Suggested resolutions for the idea that women should pray with their heads covered (but men should not) vary widely. Perhaps the most prominent of these is simply reading the word “head” as a metaphor for “boss” in verse 3 but as a physical head elsewhere. The husband is the woman’s “head,” but only for one verse. Few readers who interpret the passage this way seem to think that a woman who prays must physically cover her husband while doing so. Thus, the *head* = *boss* reading often gets generalized into a doctrine of male authority.

A second, less common, interpretation of the passage incorporates the practice of head covering in Corinth at the time: women who covered their heads showed they were under the protection of a powerful father or husband and were therefore not someone to be mistreated. If this was Paul’s intent, the letter is liberating in its symbolic demonstration of God’s protection for vulnerable women, but it also leaves much of the passage still puzzling since it does not seem to fully account for Paul’s references to angels and to woman-as-the-glory-of-man.

A third idea—and there are many more—considers the historical possibility that long or loose hair was considered sexually provocative, in which case the passage could be directing men to pray “uncovered” (have short hair) but for women to put their hair up instead of letting it hang down. As with other interpretations, such a reading leaves the universality of Paul’s instructions—the implication that all of the churches should comply in verse 16—baffling to modern Christians.

I list these briefly not to dismiss such interpretations but to indicate the measure of our universal befuddlement. Many scholars have tackled the passage with great insight regarding the language of this letter and the historical context in which it was written. But the fact so many believers are still puzzled seems to indicate a continuing dissatisfaction with these answers, thoughtful though they may be. Generally speaking, we don’t think this passage has been fully understood and we don’t really know what to do with Paul’s instructions. At any rate—and with some exceptions—the majority of Western Christians don’t *behave* like we really believe women should cover their heads when they pray, though in America men will often remove their hats. (To be fair, this may be a vestigial tradition of respect. Plenty of men also de-hat at the playing of the national anthem.)

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Many teachings on this passage begin with an assumption that Paul is writing about authority, and that the framing language of verse 3—“But I want you to realize”—is simply a polite phrase introducing the pattern that follows. This assumption misses the implication that Paul’s audience is about to receive something they may not otherwise understand. He wants them to see the practice of congregational prayer and prophecy with new eyes, to understand something that *isn’t* obvious. This undercuts the idea that Paul intends to establish a divine pattern that places God above the man and the man above the woman because such a pattern was already ingrained in the ancient world. Indeed, it is ingrained in us still. Rather, what we’re meant to “realize” is the *transformation* of that pattern. But seeing congregational prayer and prophecy with new eyes is difficult if we approach the text with presuppositions of a hierarchy. This is why it’s almost impossible for contemporary readers to consider the possibility that when Paul uses the word *kephalē* in this passage he means a literal human head but in a metaphorical X = Y construction.

But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. (1 Cor 11:3 NIV)

Instead of reading this as an example of who's bossing who, I suggest that the essential framework is the early church tradition of congregational prayer and prophecy to which Paul is pointing, and that framework depends on an image-based metaphor rather than one based in the concept of headship or governance. When Paul uses the word *head* here, he means an actual human head, something capable of being literally covered by a prayer shawl.

Now obviously this raises two questions: how can a man's physical head *be* Christ? And how can a woman's physical head *be* man/mankind?

The answer lies in the same basic metaphor Paul uses in Ephesians 5:22–23 and 2 Corinthians 11:2, that husband and wife are not just a human image but a divine image, the united image-bearers of Genesis 1:27. Seen this way, the man and the woman are, together, a picture of Christ and the church (Eph 5:32), and that union is in turn a picture of heaven and earth.

The man, in other words, is a symbol or representation of Christ—a cosmic logo for the *Logos*—even when he is not very Christlike as an individual. And the woman is likewise a symbol or representation of the church—the whole church, all of us, male and female—“for we are members of his body” (Eph 5:30 NIV). Even when the woman is not on her best behavior, she is nonetheless a kind of Nike swoosh for redeemed humanity. And it should be obvious that in their symbolic capacity neither of these symbols, the man nor the woman, is based in the self. Each is meaningful because it points *outside* the self to something else.

The imagery of this interpretation makes sense of the entire passage—but only if we recognize early church imagery. That is, the metaphor Paul uses depends on a recognition of the picture he has in mind, the picture that serves as his reference point—that of the orant, or praying person. In *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*, author Alan Kreider explains the significance of the orant to Christian worship:

Christians adopted the orant—typically a female—as the most common depiction of the Christian. They could do this confidently, because the stance of the orant was the stance of the Christian at prayer. . . . The outstretched hands indicated innocence but also mimed the cross. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

The orant, in other words, was the man or woman who stood in front of the congregation and either prayed to God on behalf of the church or prophesied to them as a mouthpiece of heaven. Furthermore, those who served as an orant always stood in the same posture: feet together, arms outstretched, eyes open and looking heavenward. Robin M. Jensen notes that, “The majority of surviving examples are female, male parallels are less abundant,” later adding that, “Early Christian writers noted that the prayer posture imitated the appearance of Christ on the cross (Minucius Felix, Oct. 29.7–8; Tertullian, Or. 14).”<sup>3</sup>

An orant thus presented to their congregation one of two images. A man stood in the posture of crucifixion; he imaged Christ. A woman in this posture portrayed supplication and surrender; she imaged the church. This may be the concrete, embodied image Paul's metaphor points to. Indeed, we can point to it even today

because those early Christians left the image for us. It is painted again and again in the catacombs as a memorial for the dead. There it's recorded as a defining identity, as if to say that in life this person may not have been wealthy or powerful, but they stood for God and for the church, and could anything be more important?<sup>4</sup> And orant imagery wasn't just commemorative; scholars are now recognizing that a ritual element was likely present too.<sup>5</sup> I don't mean to suggest that the orant is the point. I mean only that the orant is the primary image, perhaps the only image, through which Paul's metaphor can be understood. We might say that it is the *equals* sign of his  $X = Y$  language.

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Picture, then, a male orant of the first century in a crowded, candle-lit room standing in the posture of crucifixion, praying or prophesying to his brothers and sisters in the Lord, and hear Paul's words again:

But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. (1 Cor 11:3–4)

Whether he's praying or prophesying, a man in this posture is imaging the embodied *Logos* that bridges heaven and earth. As long as he stands before his congregation as an orant, he represents Christ on the cross. Wearing a *tallit* (prayer shawl) is inappropriate for a male orant because it suggests a limitation of Christ. Wearing it would suggest a symbolic need for covering when in fact Christ *is* that covering. Or, to put this even more simply, men should stop wearing a prayer shawl when they serve as an orant because doing so visually portrays something untrue about God.

Or again, picture a woman standing as an orant, bathed in the flickering light of that same household and reflecting in her very posture the supplication of the church—arms outstretched, eyes and hands raised, the very glory of mankind—and listen to Paul's concern for the image of prayer she represents:

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. (1 Cor 11:7–10 NIV)

Woman-as-the-glory-of-man is not a hierarchical statement but a collective one. This woman standing before us represents all of us, the whole congregation, male and female. And her glory is covered not because she is a woman but because she is our glory, and as Paul tells us in the first chapter of this same letter, “no flesh should glory in his

presence” (1 Cor 1:29 KJV). This woman who prays or prophesies before the congregation, whoever she is and whatever position she holds in the church, is not just a woman, and her head is not just a *kephalē*. For as long as she stands there speaking and imaging and embodying the rest of us, she doesn’t represent women or wives or even the act of submission. She represents humanity—both men and women—and because she is the image of God but also the glory of man, she covers her head to image properly our right of access. Many translations refer to this head covering as a “symbol of authority,”<sup>6</sup> which is to say a token of the power to appear before the throne of grace. But, we who have been brought into the family of God have been brought near not through our own merit or glory but through something far beyond human achievement. The woman who serves as orant is a reminder of this fact.

That covering on the female orant’s head is not a sign of her being under the authority of her human husband. It is rather, the authority of the covenantal blood of Jesus. When she speaks to or for God, she speaks as his Bride—the Church. Which is why it matters that woman was created for man; without that understanding—the X of an X = Y—we would perhaps miss the startling revelation that the church was made for Christ.

To be clear, I don’t think this interpretation implies that women must cover their heads whenever they go to church. Just as the priest entering the holy of holies donned the glory of his garment only when going before God’s presence on behalf of the people (Exod 28:2, 29), the essential principle is that the metaphor matters because it points to a spiritual reality. But that reality must be imaged properly. If the church were to bring back the function of the orant—an idea for which we may not be ready—then I think Paul’s instructions to the church at Corinth might regain their original power and significance.

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It’s probably more important that we return to the power and significance of imaging, of embodiment, and of recognizing the depth of metaphor in Scripture. We were image-bearers once. But in our zeal to eradicate idols from our midst we seem to have hammered out a new one, making of our sacred and inspired text something besides “the Scriptures that testify about me [Jesus]” (John 5:39 NIV). Instead of following these words of life to the Word of Life, instead of letting the Bible testify about the incarnate *Logos* who joins heaven and earth, we have flattened the words into imageless patterns and propositions. We have re-made ourselves from image-bearers into text-bearers. And in so doing we have missed the point, which is Christ. I daresay we have put out the light, and then put out the Light.

It’s not that the gospel isn’t meant to be shared with words, or that the gospel texts of the New Testament aren’t meant to be read—and read regularly. I mean only that the gospel isn’t a matter of words only, or even of words first. It isn’t, as we seem to unconsciously accept, a set of propositions that must be believed unto salvation, the bullet-point statement of faith on every church’s website. The gospel is a story that must be lived. It must be embodied, and embodied by the body of Christ, the church—male and female.

In the end, the gospel is a Person to be followed, the Word made flesh, the very image of the invisible God.

## Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, act 5, scene 2, line 7.
2. Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Baker Academic, 2016) 204–5.
3. Robin M. Jensen, “Ritual and Early Christian Art,” *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, ed. Risto Uro et al. (Oxford University Press, 2018) 589–90.
4. Such ceremonial respect for the orant may have even earlier roots in the OT; David’s last words, recorded in 2 Sam 23:1–7, are not a recollection of his wars or his building aspirations but of the simple fact that God spoke *to* him and God spoke *through* him. For us this should come as a rebuke not only of our materialism but of our text-only approach to Scripture.
5. “Among the visual images that decorated early Christian tomb chambers and stone sarcophagi are depictions of individuals engaging in certain ritual activities. ... One common motif among these funerary images is a frontally rendered and veiled figure with arms extended to indicate the act of prayer.” Jensen, “Ritual and Early Christian Art,” *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, ed. Risto Uro et al., 588.
6. ESV, NET, and NASB all use this phrase. Young’s Literal Translation uses “[a token of] authority.”



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