

Paul, the Cantankerous Corinthians, and Fashions of Head-Covering

In what is known as Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he tackles the issues that face the church in Corinth in the mid-first century CE.¹ In chapter two, verses two through sixteen, Paul specifically addresses the contentious issue of women praying without covering their heads.² Seemingly because he knows it is a contentious issue, Paul offers multiple approaches to looking at the issue of female head coverings and admonishes the Corinthians to decide for themselves but not to have any head-covering custom at all if it causes conflict within the church (1 Cor. 11:13, 16).³

It seems that women in the Corinthian church were not covering their heads; this was something that Paul objected to and sought to remedy (1 Cor. 11:2-16).⁴ Paul seems to expect that the culture (or "nature" itself) has taught them to cover their heads (1 Cor. 11:14-15).⁵ Though scholars disagree on what sort of social practice it was, it seems that head-covering of some sort was a common social practice for women in either Jewish or Greek society in the first century CE. In his book, Victor Furnish explains that it was a Jewish custom for women to cover their heads when they went out.⁶ The Oxford Bible Commentary further explains that Jewish women were expected to cover their heads when they were in the presence of any men who were not members of their family.⁷ Any disregard for this custom might have been seen as immodesty

¹ J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians" (ed. Leander Keck; vol. 10 of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 776-777.

² Wayne A. Meeks, ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 2154-2155.

³ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

⁴ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154-2155.

⁵ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

⁶ Victor Paul Furnish. *The Moral Teachings of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 97.

⁷ John Barton and John Mudimann, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1125.

or forwardness.⁸ Conzelmann explains that while scholarly speculation is rampant, no one knows for certain whether the custom of female head covering is Greek or Jewish, but he does not deny that it was some of social practice.⁹

Furthermore, no one can agree on the sort of head-covering that women in the first century were culturally required to wear. The New Interpreter's Bible speculates that it could have been some sort of shawl or simply that they were to wear their hair long.¹⁰ In support of the idea that women were to wear their hair long, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:15 that women's hair was given to them for a covering.¹¹ Other scholars understand the head covering as a veil, because the word for authority used in verse ten is similar to the Aramaic word for veil.¹² Though scholars disagree on what exactly the custom was, the fact remains that Paul believed that women in the Corinthian church should wear head-coverings and that the cultural norms he draws on in 1 Corinthians 11:14-15 are meant to support his arguments.¹³

Paul's first argument to persuade the Corinthian church to adopt his position on female head covering during worship uses the rhetorical technique of *logos*. Paul constructs a logical argument based on the Hebrew/Jewish account(s) of Creation (Gen.1-3).¹⁴ Paul begins his argument by stating his conclusion, that there is a hierarchy within Christianity and, as a result,

⁸ Barton and Muddimann, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, 1126.

⁹ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (ed. George W. MacRae; trans. James W. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 184-185.

¹⁰ J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander Keck), 10:928.

¹¹ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

¹² D. Ebor, ed. *The New English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) 210, footnote 10.

¹³ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

¹⁴ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 6-10.

women must wear head-coverings and men must not (1 Cor. 11:3-5).¹⁵ Paul goes on from there to explain how he reaches his conclusion (1 Cor. 11:7-9).¹⁶

Paul's explanation of his stance on the head-covering issue begins with Paul explaining that men should not cover their heads because they reflect the image of God (1 Cor. 11:7).¹⁷ In Genesis 1:26-27, it says that God created humans in His/Her image.¹⁸ This must be the verse to which Paul is referring. Paul implies that men should not cover their faces because they were created in the image of God (1 Cor. 11:7).¹⁹ It is possible he issues this admonishment because during prayer or prophesy one is speaking words to or from God. Covering one's head in that situation is to cover Christ, the head of the man, who gives or receives those words (1 Cor. 11:2, 7).²⁰

It seems that this would apply to both genders because God created male and female in His/Her image in Genesis 1:26-27, but in 1 Corinthians 11:7-9, it becomes apparent that such is not the case.²¹ Paul says that, unlike men, women are to wear head-coverings when they pray or prophesy, because they are created in the image of man. That is not to be found in Genesis 1:26-27.²² Perhaps the reason for this head-covering is to block on the humanness of the woman—the head, which is man—when she prays to God or delivers prophesy from God (1 Cor. 11:3, 7).

Paul goes on to say that man was not made from woman, but woman was made from man (1 Cor. 11:8).²³ Paul, in this and the following verse, brings in Genesis 2:21-23 and it becomes clear that he is reading Genesis 1-3 as one story rather than two and is reading Genesis 1:26-27

¹⁵ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

¹⁶ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

¹⁷ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

¹⁸ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 7.

¹⁹ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

²⁰ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

²¹ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 7, 2154.

²² Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 7.

²³ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

in light of Genesis 2:21-23.²⁴ Paul establishes through the use of the Hebrew scripture that man is the head of woman (Gen. 2:21-23, 1 Cor. 8-9).²⁵ He believes that woman was created from man; that man was the source of woman (1 Cor. 11:3, 8).²⁶ Paul's way of reading the story sets up the hierarchy mentioned in verse two and explains his understanding of the differences in head-covering protocol for men and women found in verse seven.²⁷

The hierarchy in verse two is created by speaking of the "heads" or sources of things. God is the head of Christ. Christ is the head of man. Man is the head of woman (1 Cor. 11:2).²⁸ Paul explains in his later argument, explored above, why man is the source of woman.²⁹ The New Century Bible Commentary explains that Christ is the head/source of man, because Christ is the "archetypal man."³⁰ God is the source of Christ, because Christ is the son of God and belongs to God (1 Cor. 3:23, 11:3).³¹ This hierarchy—God as the source of Christ as the source of man is the source of woman—is Paul's primary argument for why women should cover their heads to pray and prophesy and men should not.

In this argument, Paul does not speak from the limited Christian tradition available to him. He refers to the Creation story of the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 1-3).³² He offers several slightly varied interpretations of the story in a limited space—that man reflects God and woman reflects man, that woman came from man, and that woman was made for the sake of man (1 Cor. 11:8-9).³³ His varied attacks point to his concern that his argument would not be readily accepted.

²⁴ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 6-10, 2155.

²⁵ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 8, 2154.

²⁶ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

²⁷ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

²⁸ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

²⁹ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

³⁰ Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich. Eerdmans, 1980), 103.

³¹ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2145, 2154.

³² Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 6-10.

³³ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

His final sentence of the first argument concludes and offers a final explanation for why women should have a head-covering. Women should have a head-covering, as a sign of authority, because of the angels (1 Cor. 11:10).³⁴ The head-covering as a sign of authority does not flow seamlessly from Paul's argument. We could assume that Paul believes women should have this head-covering to demonstrate that they do have authority that the order of creation would otherwise prevent them from having. However, this does not flow well from the idea that women should wear the covering because they are not reflections of God, but reflections of man (1 Cor. 11:7).³⁵ Paul could mean that women are physically under authority the authority of men. This fits well with his understanding of the hierarchy. It also summarizes Paul argument up to that point well. The seemingly hasty addition of this sentence might further indicate Paul's concern that the issue will be a contentious one and in order to convince the Corinthians that women should cover their heads he needs to use all the resources available to him.

When Paul finishes his first argument, he writes "nevertheless..." which signifies his transition from his first argument to his second one.³⁶ Paul draws on the same creation story from Genesis 1-3, but this time he offers a different conclusion.³⁷ Paul says that though woman was originally made from man, man comes from woman.³⁸ By placing the original creation of woman next to birth, Paul explains his earlier statement about the interdependence of man and woman and makes an argument for mutuality.³⁹ This argument is based on the rhetorical technique of *pathos*—an argument based on experience. The Corinthians have knowledge of and experience with the birth of babies. If one takes from the statement, "woman is not independent

³⁴ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

³⁵ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

³⁶ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

³⁷ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 6-10, 2155.

³⁸ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 8, 2155.

³⁹ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

of man or man independent woman,” a sense of equality or, at least, mutuality, then one is confused because this seems to be in direct contradiction with Paul’s first hierarchical argument.⁴⁰ In fact, this seems to have little to do with Paul’s argument. He is not even addressing head-coverings in verses eleven and twelve.⁴¹

Because Paul refers to the same small part of the story of creation in both arguments, it seems that the two must be related (1 Cor. 11:8-9, 12).⁴² In fact, because he sets that small part in tension within the idea of childbirth, Paul seems to be correcting one argument with the other. He seems to be saying that though women should wear head-coverings and though there is a hierarchy of some sort, there is still mutuality “in the Lord (1 Cor. 11:11).”⁴³ This self-correction indicates that Paul is trying to be very precise in his argument and avoid unnecessary conflict. This is a further indication that Paul was certain he had moved into embattled territory by making the argument that women should wear head-coverings to pray and prophesy.

Paul’s final argument comes after he tells the Corinthians to make their own judgment on the issue (1 Cor. 11:13-15).⁴⁴ This is another appeal to the experience of the Corinthians. Rather than appealing to personal experience, as in his second argument, Paul appeals to cultural experience in this third argument. Paul poses a question about “nature itself,” but nature teaches nothing about hairstyles, so Paul must be referring to cultural norms in his question. In earlier verses Paul makes it clear that a woman with a shaved head is disgraced (1 Cor. 11:5-6).⁴⁵ In those same verses there is some indication that her disgrace extends to her husband because it is said that her head is disgraced, and in verse three, her husband is referred to as her head (1 Cor.

⁴⁰ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

⁴¹ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154-2155.

⁴² Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154-2155.

⁴³ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

⁴⁴ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

⁴⁵ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

11:3, 5).⁴⁶ In a society where honor was the highest aim, disgrace was considered the greatest error.⁴⁷ This appeal to the idea of honor and disgrace would be a strong argument for Paul's audience.

Verse fifteen is the end of Paul's argument. Nowhere in first Corinthians three through fifteen did Paul appeal to the tradition of Christ.⁴⁸ Because he relies on reason and experience, it is apparent he has moved beyond those teachings and into his own understanding of cultural practices. He offers at least three different arguments to explain why women should cover their heads to pray and prophesy. Since he seemingly feels the need to justify himself multiple ways, it is likely he suspected this issue would cause strife in the Christian community at Corinth.

Clearly, the issue of women praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered is an important one for Paul. He offers three different arguments and spends more ink on the issue than he does on the blatant abuses to the Lord's Supper addressed in 11:17-22.⁴⁹ However, he does not take the same approach to address the issue of head-coverings in the same way that he takes to address the issue of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11).⁵⁰ Paul clearly denounces the latter abuses and does not leave any room for argument (1 Cor. 11:22).⁵¹ On the issue of head-coverings, Paul leaves the decision up to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:13).⁵² Perhaps the reason that Paul clearly denounces the abuse of the observance of the Lord's Supper as an opportunity to show one's status is that Paul's denunciation is grounded in the teachings of Jesus. In Luke, Jesus clearly taught that one should humble oneself at the table during the parable of the banquet

⁴⁶ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

⁴⁷ J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander Keck), 10: 782.

⁴⁸ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

⁴⁹ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

⁵⁰ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

⁵¹ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

⁵² Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

(Luke 14:7-14).⁵³ Because Jesus denounced such behavior, Paul would feel more comfortable speaking out against it. This admonition was based in tradition.

Verses two and three of chapter eleven tell us that Paul is not speaking from tradition about women wearing or not wearing of head-coverings.⁵⁴ Paul says in verse two that he commends the Corinthians for keeping the traditions he has passed on to them, presumably traditions handed down from the time Christ was present on Earth. Paul follows that statement by saying in verse three, “but I want you to understand (1 Cor. 11:3).”⁵⁵ This “but” seems to signify that he is moving into a different realm. He has talked about tradition and is moving away from that and into the realm of cultural practice.

The fact that Paul encourages that Corinthians to “judge for [them]selves” and to have no such custom if there is contention directly contrasts with his approach in 11:17-22, and it is a further indication that Paul has moved out of the scope of tradition.⁵⁶ Because he is not writing from tradition, he allows the Corinthians freedom to consider alternatives and to reject taking a stance on the head-covering issue altogether.

The fact that Paul has left Christian tradition and has moved into the realm of personal cultural practice is one explanation for why he seems so worried about conflict throughout 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. The Christians at Corinth could not easily argue with traditions handed down from Christ, but would probably be more willing to argue with the musings of Paul.

Paul clearly expected a fight from the Corinthians around the issue of head-covering. He even says in verse sixteen that if anyone wishes to be contentious then there should be no

⁵³ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 1988.

⁵⁴ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

⁵⁵ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2154.

⁵⁶ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.

custom.⁵⁷ Paul attempts to appease any cantankerous persons by offering multiple arguments from reason and experience to persuade the Corinthians that women should cover their heads to pray and prophesy. He was concerned that the Corinthians, whom history tells us were often contentious, would again have conflict over a cultural issue.

⁵⁷ Meeks, *HarperCollins*, 2155.