

# *New Testament Teaching on the Ministry of Women*

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The ministry of women is one of the issues that divides Christians today. Some churches ordain women to teach and to lead, others do not. Much has been written on both sides of the issue, but disagreement over it continues.

A key question in the debate is how to interpret NT teaching on the subject. My aim in this article is to expound this teaching as accurately as possible, in relation both to the circumstances in which it was originally given, and to the Church today.<sup>1</sup>

## **Jesus' teaching**

### *Equality*

The writers of the gospels do not record Jesus' teaching on the ministry of women. They do, however, record his reply to the question posed by the Sadducees about the resurrection of the dead, as to who would be a woman's husband if she married seven brothers (Luke 20:27–40).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Jesus said to them, 'The children of this age marry and are given in marriage, <sup>35</sup>but those who are deemed worthy to attain that age [the age to come] and the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. <sup>36</sup>For indeed they cannot die anymore, for they are equal to angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.'

Here Jesus indicates that men and women are essentially *equal*: in the resurrection they are 'equal to angels' (*isaggeloi*) and thus to each other.

Consistent with this, Jesus included women among those who accompanied him in his ministry (Luke 8:1–3). In doing this, he went against Jewish culture at the time. According to the contemporary Jewish historian, Josephus, women were not allowed to worship with men in the temple.<sup>3</sup> He also expressed the opinion, 'the woman is inferior to the man in every way'.<sup>4</sup>

### *Different roles*

In his reply to the Sadducees, Jesus assigned different roles to men and women: men 'marry', women are 'given in marriage' by their fathers (Luke 20:34). Consistent with this, when he appointed apostles, he chose only *men* (Luke 6:12–16).

For some Christians, this settles the issue of whether women should be leaders in the Church today. Others argue that Jesus was here going along with contemporary Jewish culture, having gone as far as he could to oppose it by including women in his team.

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<sup>1</sup> My exposition of Paul's teaching follows closely the one I gave in my book, *Paul's Teaching on the Ministry of Women* (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 1st edn., 1991; 2nd edn., 1996). This is now out of print.

<sup>2</sup> Here and in Galatians 3:26, I have translated *huioi* 'children' as both genders are intended. The word carries the implication of privilege.

<sup>3</sup> *Jewish Antiquities* 15.419; *Jewish War* 5.199, 227.

<sup>4</sup> *Against Apion* 2.201.

This leads us to consider the teaching of the apostle Paul, who established churches in the wider Roman world, where attitudes to women were different.<sup>5</sup> We begin with his insistence on the equality of men and women (Gal. 3:26–28), and go on to consider his teaching on men and women in church (1 Tim. 2:8–15; 1 Cor. 11:2–16, 14:34–35).

### **Men and women are equal in Christ (Galatians 3:26–28)**

Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians because the churches in Galatia had come under the influence of certain Jewish Christians, who taught that Gentiles only had a place in the Church if they first became Jews (1:6–7, 3:1–3, 5:2; cf. Acts 15:1, 5). Paul argues against this view at considerable length, and as part of his argument, he says:

<sup>26</sup>For you are *all* children of God through the [said] faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>27</sup>For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Paul says that, as all who have been baptized into Christ have put on the same robes, they are therefore all one. Any differences in status between them disappear. Gentiles become equal to Jews, slaves to masters, women to men. A Gentile does not have to become a Jew to be accepted in God's family; in Christ, he or she is accepted as a Gentile.

Paul's inclusion of women in this context is particularly significant because, as we have seen, Jewish men looked down on women at the time. He no doubt expected that the Judaizers in Galatia would make this attitude part of their teaching. By including the phrase 'not male and female', he explicitly opposed it.

That Paul himself held women in high esteem comes out in the way he spoke about them in his letters, e.g. Phoebe ('she became a patroness of many, and of me myself', Rom. 16:1–2), Priscilla ('Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus', Rom. 16:3–4), Euodia and Syntyche ('who contended with me in the gospel', Phil. 4:2–3). In this, he was following the example set by his Master (John 20:10–18, etc.).

### **Instructions to Timothy concerning men and women in church (1 Timothy 2:8–15)**

Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy after he had left Timothy to look after the church at Ephesus (1:3). Among his instructions to him are the following.

#### *Concerning men at worship (8)*

<sup>8</sup>I will, then, that the men in every place should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing;

This instruction follows Paul's call in verses 1–7 that 'supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people'. He wants the men at gatherings for worship ('the men in every place') to pray with a loving concern for others, and not with 'anger or disputing'.

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<sup>5</sup> See below.

*Concerning women's dress (9–10)*

<sup>9</sup>[I will] likewise that women should adorn themselves in respectable clothing, with modesty and self-control, not with plaits and gold or pearls or costly dress, <sup>10</sup>but by what befits women who profess godliness, good works.

This instruction is closely linked with the preceding one ('likewise ...'). Paul does not want women to dress immodestly, in the same way in which he does not want men to be arguing and fighting. Rather, he wants women to adorn themselves with good works, in the same way in which he wants men to have holy hands. In other words, he wants both men and women to conduct themselves, and gather for worship, in a way that befits their Christian profession.

Paul's instruction about women's dress is expressed in similar terms to those used by Peter in his instructions to wives (1 Pet. 3:1–6). In particular, Paul speaks of 'plaits and gold or pearls or costly dress' while Peter speaks of 'braiding of hair and wearing of gold or putting on of gowns' (3). These descriptions reflect the way in which women in the Greco-Roman world of the 1st century sought to make themselves more attractive, and need to be translated into contemporary terms. A woman who makes herself too attractive can create difficulties for men, especially in church, where she can distract them from worshipping the Lord.

*Concerning women in church (11–12)*

Paul continues:<sup>6</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Let a woman learn in quietness, in all subjection. <sup>12</sup>But I do not permit a woman to teach, or to take authority over a man, but to be in quietness.

Here I have translated the unusual verb *authentēō* 'take authority'. The word literally means 'self-act' (from *autos*, self, *hentēs*, act). Around the NT period, it and its cognates were used of a variety of acts, from exercising authority to committing murder or building a tower.<sup>7</sup> This word group seems to have been used when there was particular significance in the fact that the subject acted himself or herself. The early Church took the verb here to refer to exercising authority.<sup>8</sup>

Paul says that women should not teach in church, or take up a position of telling men what to do. Rather, they should learn quietly and submissively from them (cf. 1 Cor. 14:34).

Paul presents this rule as a general one ('I do not permit ...'), and not as advice to meet a particular problem at Ephesus. In accordance with it, he goes on to restrict the oversight of the church to men (3:1–7), as he did in other churches (Titus 1:5–9). In this, he was again following the example set by his Master.

Taken at face value, however, Paul's rule about women contradicts what he says in Galatians 3:28. How can women be equal to men in Christ, and yet be asked to submit to them in church? This is a question that we shall have to seek an answer to as we follow Paul's teaching through.

<sup>6</sup> Translating *anēr* and *gunē* as in verses 8–10.

<sup>7</sup> See Leland E. Wilshire, *NTS* 34 (1988), 120–34; *EQ* 65 (1993), 43–55.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

*Paul's reasons for his instruction (13–14)*

Ephesus was a city in Asia Minor that had been colonized by the Greeks before being taken over by the Romans. In Greek society, aristocratic women, though subordinate to men of the same class, played a part in leading civil and religious life (cf. Acts 13:50; 17:4, 12).<sup>9</sup> At Ephesus, there was a huge temple (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) dedicated to the worship of the goddess the Greeks called Artemis and the Romans Diana (cf. Acts 19:23–41). This was served by priestesses as well as by priests.<sup>10</sup> A 1st-century inscription indicates that the high priestess played a prominent part in the life of the city and commanded considerable respect:<sup>11</sup>

The tribe of the Tethades to Flavia Ammon, daughter of Moschus, who is called Aristion, high priestess of the temple of Asia in Ephesus, president, twice crown-wearer, also priestess of Massilia [Marseilles], president of the games, wife of Flavius Hermocrates, for her excellence and decorous life and her devotion.

Luke tells us that the goddess of Ephesus was revered throughout the Roman world (Acts 19:27). Coins bearing the inscription *Diana Ephesia* have been discovered in many parts.<sup>12</sup>

Paul's instruction to Timothy thus went against Greco-Roman culture. He accordingly goes on to give his reasons for it (*gar*, 'For'):

<sup>13</sup>For Adam was formed first, then Eve. <sup>14</sup>And Adam was not deceived, but the woman, being deceived, came into transgression.

Paul's reasons come from the OT. The reference in verse 13 is to Genesis 2:4–24, which describes how God first created Adam, and then made Eve out of one of Adam's ribs, to be (lit.) 'a helper as opposite him'. The reference in verse 14 is to Genesis 3:1–7, which describes how the Snake induced Eve into disobeying God, and Eve then led Adam to do the same. Whether these passages necessarily imply that women should not teach or exercise authority over men is much debated. What is clear, however, both from the logic of verses 11–14, and from the way Paul uses Genesis 2:4–24 in 1 Corinthians (see below), is that he took these passages to imply that women should not do these things.

The fact that Paul based his instruction on how man and woman were created argues against the idea that he limited what women could do in church for a cultural reason. This includes the suggestion that he wanted Gentile churches to conform to Jewish culture in what women could do, so as not to offend Jews. The apostles certainly made concessions to Jewish sensibilities at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:28–29), but beyond these, as we have seen, Paul strongly resisted the Judaizing of Gentile churches, including the downgrading of women in them (Gal. 3:28). His stand on this could scarcely have been firmer (Gal. 2).

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975); Elaine Fantham, Helene Peet Foley, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Sarah B. Pomeroy, and H.A. Shapiro, *Women in the Classical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Note that some aspects of classical culture do not make pleasant reading.

<sup>10</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.23.

<sup>11</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* (London: Duckworth, 1982), Translation 258 (slightly modified). For other inscriptions to priestesses of Artemis at Ephesus, see S.M. Baugh, *JETS* 42 (1999), 443–60 (on-line at [www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article\\_ephesus\\_baugh.html](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_ephesus_baugh.html)).

<sup>12</sup> *NBD*, 381.

Richard and Catherine Kroeger have suggested that, in verses 11–15, Paul is not seeking to stop women from teaching altogether, but only from teaching the heresy that Adam came from Eve, that Adam was deceived by the Snake, and that marriage and child-bearing are demeaning.<sup>13</sup> However, this interpretation strains the Greek text. Andrew Perriman has suggested that these verses express a more general concern that women in the church should not be led astray by false teaching, and have a bad influence on the men, as Eve had had on Adam.<sup>14</sup> This again strains the Greek text. [There *was* heresy at Ephesus (4:1–3), but this was asceticism, and its proponents were mainly or exclusively men (the words describing them are masculine).]

Paul's reasons for his instruction clearly increase the tension between this passage and Galatians 3:26–28, and make the question of how one can be reconciled to the other more pressing.

### *The special role of women (15)*

Having said that 'the woman, being deceived, came into transgression', Paul adds:

<sup>15</sup>But she will be saved in her role of bearing children, if they [sc. women] remain in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

This verse has been translated in various ways. I have taken *dia* to mean 'in the attendant circumstances of' and *tēs teknogonias* 'the activity of bearing children' (cf. 5:14). As we shall see, this rendering accords with what Paul says in a similar context in 1 Corinthians 11:11–12, and best meets the demands of the context here.

The key phrase in Paul's statement is 'in her role of bearing children', i.e. of being a mother. Although he does not say so explicitly, he is following the thought of Genesis 3. In the sequel to the Fall, Adam recognizes the unique role that woman has in God's plan by naming his wife Eve (Heb. *hawwā*), 'because she became the mother of all living (*hay*)' (Gen. 3:20).

Paul has thus anticipated the question that we have been asking, and gives his own answer to it. 'Yes, men have an important and exclusive role in relation to women. But women have an important and exclusive role too: they bring children into the world.'

This answer accords with the way Paul develops his teaching on the equality of Christians in 1 Corinthians 12. Verse 13 in this chapter corresponds closely to Galatians 3:28: 'we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free'. In the immediately preceding verse, Paul likens the oneness among Christians to the oneness displayed by the parts of the human body, and in the succeeding verses, he draws out the implications of this analogy. Just as the body needs to have different members fulfilling different roles (14–26), so does a church (27–31a). Those who cannot do the impressive things that some members can do should not regard themselves as being of no value to the church on this account (14–20), while those who have an impressive role in the church should recognize the importance of the parts played by others (21–26). Indeed, they should remember that, in the human body, God has carefully balanced impressiveness and importance, making the less important parts more outwardly attractive and vice versa, 'in order that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another' (25). Paul has in view here spiritual abilities

<sup>13</sup> Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Perriman, *Speaking of Women* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998).

and roles (1–11, 27–31a), but what he says explains how he saw verse 15 of 1 Timothy 2 as balancing verses 11–14, and as harmonizing them with Galatians 3:26–28.

Taken in its narrowest sense, verse 15 does not fully succeed in restoring the equality of men and women in Christ. Not all women have children, and those who do, cease to have them in later life. Paul must have therefore regarded childbearing as implying a wider role for women (cf. 1 Cor. 7:34), and expected Timothy to be able to fill in the details. What he saw this role to be can be inferred from what he says later (5:3–16) and in other letters, and from what women he commended did. It included:

- caring for her husband and children (Tit. 2:4);
- bringing up children, including orphans (1 Tim. 5:10);
- teaching children (2 Tim. 1:5 + 3:14–15);
- running a home (1 Tim. 5:14, Tit. 2:5);
- caring for needy relatives (1 Tim. 5:16);
- providing hospitality (1 Tim. 5:10);
- looking after Christian workers (‘washing the feet of saints’, 1 Tim. 5:10);
- helping those in trouble (1 Tim. 5:10);
- praying for herself and for others (1 Tim. 5:5);
- teaching younger women (Tit. 2:3–5);
- leading prayer among women (1 Cor. 11:5 + 14:34);
- prophesying among women (1 Cor. 11:5 + 14:34);
- making and selling cloth and the like (Acts 16:14);
- helping her husband in his business (Acts 18:1–3);
- helping her husband to teach at home (Acts 18:24–26).

Most of these activities are open to women who do not have a husband or children, or whose children have grown up. The OT provides a similar list in Proverbs 31:10–31.

From what Paul says elsewhere in his letters, it is almost certain that, in NT times, some women were ordained to minister to other women and care for the needy. In Paul’s commendation of Phoebe, he describes her as a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1). This word ordinarily means ‘servant’, but it is also used of one of the two kinds of church officer in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:1–13, the other kind being *episkopos*, ‘overseer’. The distinction between *episkopos* and *diakonos* presumably corresponds to the distinction between the twelve and the seven in Acts 6:1–6. In 1 Timothy 3:1–13, Paul sets out the qualities required of *episkopoi* (1–7) and *diakonoi* (8–13). In the section on the latter, he refers to *gunaikēs* (11). This can mean ‘women’ or ‘wives’, but since there is no corresponding reference in the section on *episkopoi*, it should almost certainly be taken to refer to women *diakonoi*. There were certainly deaconesses later in the early Church.<sup>15</sup>

There may also have been an order of widows in NT churches, as there was in later centuries.<sup>16</sup> In 1 Timothy 5:3–16, the qualifications for a widow to be ‘enrolled’ (9–10) are very strict, and it is unlikely that older widows would have been refused relief (3) if they did not conform to them. The qualifications for relief seem to be those in verses 3–8.

Some commentators have taken a number of NT references to indicate that women had a wider role than Paul’s instruction in 1 Timothy 2 allows. These are not, however, conclusive. For

<sup>15</sup> Pliny, *Letters* 10.96. *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.26, 57; 3.7, 14–15; 8.19–20, 28.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., *Apostolic Constitutions* 3.1–3, 5–8, 12–15; 8.25.

example, Luke tells us that Philip had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:8–9). They may not, however, have prophesied to men. While Paul was staying with Philip, it was a *male* prophet who came and told him of the suffering that awaited him in Jerusalem (10–14).

Paul's reconciliation of his instruction with Galatians 3:28 by means of verse 15 depends crucially on the relative importance that is attached to different kinds of ministry. Paul's evaluation follows that of Jesus, who taught the worth of children (Matt. 18:1–6, 19:13–15), of showing hospitality (Matt. 10:40–42), of washing the feet of others (Matt. 23:1–12, John 13:1–17), and of helping those in trouble (Matt. 25:31–46). Indeed, such was the importance that Jesus attached to the last activity that he said that he would base the last judgment on it (Matt. 25:31–46).

Paul's aim, therefore, in prohibiting women from teaching and leading congregations was not simply to preserve a role for men. It was also to ensure that women are not taken away from *their* role. As he said in relation to spiritual gifts, a body cannot operate if all the parts do the same thing. 'If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing?' (1 Cor. 12:17). In particular, a body cannot operate if all the parts do the showy things, and none the vital ones (21–26).

Paul's concerns here are borne out by the problems that arise when women do everything that men do. Children and the elderly receive less attention,<sup>17</sup> many men find the loss of role difficult to cope with and react badly to it,<sup>18</sup> and many women feel themselves under pressure.<sup>19</sup> Contrariwise, serious problems arise when men fail to respect women, and to treat them as their equals.<sup>20</sup> Paul's analogy of the body requires men and women to see themselves as being vital to each other (1 Cor. 12:21–26).

### **Instructions to the Corinthians concerning covering the head in worship (1 Corinthians 11:2–16)**

Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians in reply to a letter that he had received from them (7:1a). In it, he gives instructions about men and women in church that are similar to the ones he later gave to Timothy.

Corinth was a Greek city that had been razed and rebuilt by the Romans. Most of the Christians there were Gentiles (Acts 18:1–17, 1 Cor. 12:2). The cultural background of the church was therefore predominantly Greco-Roman.

In this section of the letter, Paul argues that, while men should have their heads uncovered when they worship, women should have theirs covered. The passage is a difficult one. My exposition of it is correspondingly more tentative than that of the other passages studied.

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<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Patricia Morgan, *Who Needs Parents?* (Institute of Economic Affairs Health and Welfare Unit, Choice in Welfare No. 31, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Anthony Clare, *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000); Norman Dennis and George Erdos, *Families without Fatherhood*, 3rd edn. (Institute of Economic Affairs Health and Welfare Unit, Choice in Welfare No. 12, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Caroline Quest (ed.), *Liberating Women from Modern Feminism* (Institute of Economic Affairs Health and Welfare Unit, Choice in Welfare No. 19, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Cf., e.g., Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

### *Translation*

I take *katakalyptō* and *akatakalyptos* as having their usual meanings of ‘cover’ and ‘uncovered’. ‘Cover’ is a better translation than ‘veil’, since the latter suggests covering the face, whereas Paul is speaking about covering the head (cf. 2 Cor. 3:12–18). Greek and Roman women of the period wore a rectangular shawl (in Greek, *himation*, in Latin, *palla*) with which they could cover their heads when they wished to.<sup>21</sup>

### *Introduction (2)*

<sup>2</sup>Now I praise you that you have remembered me in everything, and hold firmly the traditions as I delivered them to you.

Paul commends the Corinthians for keeping the teachings that he had passed on to them. Evidently, however, some of them were questioning the teaching about covering the head in worship (16a), and this had led the church to raise the matter with him (7:1a). He therefore goes on to explain this teaching to them (3–16).

Notice that he is not speaking to the Corinthians on the subject for the first time. This partly explains why the passage is so difficult to interpret. Paul is able to assume a previous knowledge of the subject, and to present his arguments less fully than he would have done if he had been writing to Christians who knew nothing about it.

### *The rules about covering the head apply to everyone (3–5a)*

Paul begins by making a series of statements. In the Greek text, the emphasis falls on the words indicated.

<sup>3</sup>But I want you to know that the head of *every* man is Christ, and the head of a woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God. <sup>4</sup>*Every* man who prays or prophesies having anything down over his head shames his head [sc. Christ], <sup>5a</sup>and *every* woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered shames her head [sc. the man].

As can be seen, the emphasis falls on the repeated word ‘every’ (*pas*), and it is this, I suggest, that provides the connection between the verses. Paul is saying, ‘You remember that I told you that there is an order in the universe: God, Christ, man, woman. Well, I want you to know that this order applies to everyone, without exception. Every man occupies the place of a man and should act as a man; every woman should act as a woman. As I told you, the right way for a man to worship is with his head uncovered, and the right way for a woman is with her head covered. Everyone should keep to this pattern; any deviation from it is shameful.’

In verse 3, Paul says that the head of a woman is ‘the’ man. For a married woman, this is her husband (Eph. 5:22–33).

What Paul means by ‘head’ (*kephalē*) in this and related passages has been much debated. On my interpretation of the present passage, the precise meaning is not critical. His argument only

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<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Lillian M. Wilson, *The Clothing of the Ancient Romans* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1938), 148–50.



requires there to be an order in the universe: God, Christ, man, woman. I will briefly consider the meaning of ‘head’ in other passages later.

Notice that Paul has not explained why it is shameful for a man to worship with his head covered or a woman with hers uncovered. He goes on to do this later (7–10). Notice also that he has not placed any restriction on a woman praying or prophesying; this again he does later (14:34–35).

*The shame is considerable (5b–6)*

Paul stresses how shameful it is for a woman to pray or prophesy with her head uncovered:

<sup>5b</sup>For it is just the same as if she has been shaved. <sup>6</sup>For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered.

Paul likens the shame of a woman worshipping with her head uncovered to that of a woman whose head has been shaved (5b). The latter was almost certainly a punishment for adultery or similar misconduct (as we shall see, Greek and Roman women were very proud of their hair, and to have had it shaved off would have been a considerable loss).<sup>22</sup> Paul’s comparison would have shocked the Corinthians, but he wanted them to realize the seriousness of a woman worshipping without a head-covering.

Paul’s comparison is not of course an obvious one. He accordingly goes on to explain it (‘For’, 6), arguing as follows. If a woman wants to worship like a man, with her head uncovered, then logically she should go the whole way, and have her hair cut short (‘shorn’) like a man (6a; cf. 14). But if she were to have her hair cut short, she would look the same as a woman whose hair had been shaved off and was beginning to grow again (the verb translated ‘has been shaved’ is in the perfect tense, describing something done in the past whose effects continue into the present). If a woman were to go the whole way in worshipping like a man, therefore, she would find herself incurring the disgrace of a whore. This being so, she should settle for worshipping as a woman should, and cover her head (6b).

Note that Paul only stresses the rule for women. This suggests that it was the rule for women that the Corinthians were questioning (cf. 13–16).

*The reason for the rule for men (7a)*

Paul now presents his reasons for the rule about head covering (‘For ...’). He starts with the rule for men:

<sup>7a</sup>For indeed a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God;

Paul bases the rule on Genesis 1:26–27 (‘... God created the man in his image ...’). He argues that, because man is made in the image of God, he reflects something of the glory of God, and should not hide this glory when he worships God.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse* 64.3.

*The reason for the rule for women (7b–10)*

Paul proceeds to explain the rule for women. Having said that a man is ‘the image and glory of God’, he goes on:<sup>23</sup>

<sup>7b</sup>But the woman is the glory of man. <sup>8</sup>For man is not from woman, but woman from man; <sup>9</sup>for indeed a man was not created for the woman, but a woman for the man. <sup>10</sup>Because of this, the woman ought to have authority over her head because of the angels.

This section is made difficult by the cryptic nature of verse 10. This almost certainly arises from the fact that Paul is addressing readers who already know something about the subject. Indeed, verse 10 begins emphatically, ‘It is because of this that ...’, as if what follows is something that he has told the Corinthians before, and which they are questioning. This would explain its abbreviated form.

However, the broad lines of Paul’s argument in these verses are, I think, clear enough. According to Genesis, woman was made from the rib of man to be a helper for him (8–9, from Genesis 2:18–24). She therefore reflects something of the glory of man (7b). When she worships God, she must therefore cover this glory up, otherwise the angels who worship with her (Heb. 12:22–24) will be distracted from God’s glory by man’s (10).

This still leaves, of course, a number of questions. First, what does Paul mean by ‘the woman ought to have authority over her head’? I think the answer to this is that she should ‘control’ her head, i.e. cover it when it should be covered.

A second question is, why does Paul locate the ‘glory of man’ in a woman’s hair? (It is her hair that she has to cover, and in verse 15, Paul describes it as her ‘glory’.) The answer to this lies in the way women dressed at the time. Women of the period wore loose-fitting clothing that covered them almost completely.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, a woman’s hair became the focus of her femininity. Women who wanted to make themselves look attractive plaited their hair and decorated it with brightly coloured ribbons and expensive jewellery (cf. 1 Tim. 2:9, 1 Pet. 3:3).<sup>25</sup> Modest women, on the other hand, kept their hair covered up.<sup>26</sup> The rule that women should cover their heads in worship thus forms part of the general NT instruction that women should dress modestly (1 Tim. 2:9–10, 1 Pet. 3:1–6).

A further question is, why is Paul concerned about the sensibilities of the angels, and not just (by implication) of the men in the congregation? The answer to this can only be that he believed that angels too are vulnerable to the ‘glory of man’ (cf. Gen. 6:1–4). Thus, even when men claim that they are not being distracted by women, or when women are worshipping in the absence of men, strict modesty is necessary ‘because of the angels’.

<sup>23</sup> In verse 10, I have translated *epi* as in Revelation 11:6, 14:18, and 20:6, and *aggelos* as elsewhere in 1 Corinthians (4:9, 6:3, and 13:1).

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, Chap. 12.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women* (London: Bodley Head, 1962), 255–60.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson, 148–51.

Commentators have suggested many other interpretations of verse 10. These include reading *exousian* as ‘the symbol of a husband’s authority’ and *aggelous* as ‘civil inspectors of gatherings’.<sup>27</sup> This stretches the text and historical data.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Women are nevertheless as important as men (11–12)*

Paul is sensitive to the fact that what he has just written (8–9) could be taken to mean that men are more important than women, so, as in 1 Timothy 2, he immediately balances it:

<sup>11</sup>Nevertheless, in the Lord, there is neither woman apart from man nor man apart from woman; <sup>12</sup>for just as [in origin] the woman comes from the man, so also [now] the man comes through the woman, and all things are from God.

I have brought out the full implications of these verses in my exposition of 1 Timothy 2:15.

#### *Use your own judgment (13–15)*

Paul has presented the theological reason why a woman should worship with her head covered. However, he feels that the Corinthians’ own common sense should have told them that for a woman to worship with her head uncovered is wrong. They knew well enough that, in contrast to long hair on a man, long hair on a woman, when done up and decorated, made her look very attractive, and that if she did not cover it up in worship, she could be a distraction.

<sup>13</sup>Judge for yourselves: is it fitting for a woman to pray to God uncovered? <sup>14</sup>Does not nature itself teach you that, if indeed a man has long hair, it is a dishonour to him, <sup>15</sup>but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her, because her long hair is given to her as a wrap?

The last word here is usually translated ‘covering’. However, the word Paul uses (*peribolaion*) is different from the one he has used in the preceding verses (the verb *katakaluptō*, corresponding to the noun *katakalumma*). The word he uses here literally means something that is ‘thrown around’ something else (*peri*, around, *ballō*, throw), and has the general sense ‘wrap’. In its one other NT occurrence it is translated ‘robe’ (Heb. 1:12). In using this word, I think Paul is referring to the fact that a woman can wrap her hair round her head (i.e. do up her hair) to make herself look attractive.

#### *Conclusion (16)*

<sup>16</sup>But if anyone thinks of being contentious, we have no such practice [sc. of women uncovering their heads], nor do the churches of God.

#### **Instructions to the Corinthians concerning women in church (1 Corinthians 14:34–35)**

Paul goes on in his letter to deal with other aspects of worship (11:17–14:40). This passage comes in a section on orderly worship (14:26–40), within a longer section on spiritual gifts (12:1–14:40). Its position is not completely certain; in some manuscripts, it comes after verse 40.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), Chap. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Compare Wilson’s reading of the historical data (148–51).

<sup>34</sup>The women should be silent in the church-gatherings. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as indeed the Law says. <sup>35</sup>And if they want to learn anything, they should ask their own men at home. For it is *disgraceful* for a woman to speak in church.

Paul tells the Corinthians that women should be silent in church (34a). He explains that they are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, ‘as indeed the Law says’ (34b). He does not elaborate on this, presumably because he has already cited the OT basis for submission in 11:8–9 (sc. Gen. 2:18–24). He has also presented the balance to this in 11:11–12. Taken with these earlier statements, verse 34 parallels 1 Timothy 2:11–15. Paul adds that, if women want to ask any questions, they should ask their menfolk<sup>29</sup> at home (35a); for them to speak in church would be ‘disgraceful’ (35b).

Many commentators have tried to interpret this passage in a more permissive way. This is difficult to do without straining the text and its links with 11:8–9 and 1 Timothy 2:11–15. For example, the suggestion that Paul is only stopping women from ‘chattering’ or ‘wailing’ gives to *laleō* a meaning that it does not have in the preceding verses. Some scholars suggest that the passage was added by a later writer, but no manuscripts are known in which it does not appear. Cultural explanations of Paul’s prohibition founder, as they do in 1 Timothy 2, on his reason for it (‘as the Law says’). Cultural arguments are in any case two-edged, since the interpretation of Scripture can be culturally influenced too.

### **Relation to NT teaching on marriage**

NT teaching on men and women in church correlates with its teaching on marriage. We have already seen that Jesus spoke of husbands and wives being equal, but having different roles. Peter and Paul follow him in this. Peter writes, ‘Likewise wives, be submissive to your husbands ...’ (1 Pet. 3:1–6); he then adds, ‘You husbands likewise, live with [your wives] according to knowledge, assigning honour [to them] as to the weaker, female vessel, and as to co-heirs of [the] grace of life’ (7).<sup>30</sup> The repeated ‘likewise’ refers back to 2:18–25, where Peter calls on slaves to follow the example of Christ.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul associates the relationship between a husband and wife with that between Christ and the Church, and likens both to the relationship between the head and the body (5:22–33). He sees the head as both overseeing (1:22–23 in context) and succouring (4:15–16) the body.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, he says to wives, ‘You wives, be submissive to your husbands as to the Lord’ (22, *hupotassethe* being supplied from 21). He then explains why they should: ‘because a husband is the head of his wife as indeed Christ is the head of the Church, being himself the Saviour of this, his body’ (23). He repeats: ‘as the Church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything’ (24). Here any doubt about the meaning of the verb *hupotassō* is removed by verse 33b, where he substitutes the word *phobeō*.

<sup>29</sup> The expression ‘their own men’ usually refers to husbands (Eph. 5:22, 1 Pet. 3:1), but may have a broader meaning here.

<sup>30</sup> This verse is difficult to translate. I have indicated the words I have supplied. Many translators treat *gunaikeiō* as a noun.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1.3 (‘in a living being the head is the ruling part’) and *On Rewards and Punishments* 125 (‘... like the limbs of a body which draw their life from the forces in the head and at the top’).

Continuing to apply the analogy, he says to husbands, ‘You husbands, love your wives, as indeed Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her ...’ (25–27). He goes on: ‘In the same way, you husbands ought to love your wives as your own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as indeed Christ does the Church ...’ (28–33a).

Paul’s treatment in Colossians is similar (1:18; 2:10, 19; 3:18–19).

### **Conclusions**

1. The NT teaches that men and women are equal, but have different roles. This teaching was not determined by cultural considerations in the 1st century, but was based on the order of creation set out in Genesis 2, and the importance of motherhood, home-making, and caring for others. As such, it still holds today.
2. If this is correct, churches that have relaxed NT restrictions on the ministry of women should review their decision to do this. NT teaching may go against contemporary wisdom, but it has the Lord’s authority behind it (1 Cor. 14:37).
3. Equally, churches that maintain NT restrictions should ensure that they affirm the Biblical role for women, and accord to them the same respect and dignity as to men. They should also develop this role to meet the needs of Church and society today. In particular, they should establish ministries for women corresponding to those of deaconess and widow in the early Church.
4. Over every church door should be written Jesus’ words, ‘whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant’ (Matt. 20:26–28).

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