

Essay 4: 1 Corinthians 11 and Headship

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This is the fourth in a series of essays reflecting on biblical passages related to the debate over male headship and questions of ordaining women as elders and pastors. To this point, I have been unable to find meaningful evidence favorable to the “headship principle” as presented by those who oppose ordaining women to ministry. I now come to the second and final text in which someone is said to be head of a woman, 1 Cor 11. I have saved this text for last because this passage has been long debated. There is no universal consensus on what Paul was addressing or what the passage means. Like baptism for the dead (1 Cor 15:29) or preaching to the spirits in prison (1 Pet 3:19), it seems less than prudent to build a significant theology on a text lacking significant consensus as to its meaning. This is especially so in light of the fact that the only other text depicting someone as head of woman—which we have already examined—confines the headship function to a husband-wife relationship marriage. Caution and prudence seem in order as we examine this passage.

Nevertheless, those advocating the Gender Exclusive (GE) position for ordination see a cosmic chain of command spelled out in 1 Cor 11:3, starting with God as the head of Christ, even in prior eternity. The chain continues with Christ as the head of man and man as the head of woman (1 Cor 11:2-3). This hierarchal interpretation is thought to be reinforced by verses 7-9. There, Paul declares that man is the image and glory of God, contrasted to woman, who is said to be the glory of the man and to be made for him. Since woman was made for man, after man, etc., these points are asserted to be evidence of concept of “creation order” similar to what they assert is found in 1 Tim 2:11-13. This “creation order” is asserted to prescribe that the male has headship and spiritual authority over the female. On this basis, a woman is excluded from the function of the elder.

By contrast, many who favor the Gender Inclusive (GI) view of ordination interpret the “head” language of 1 Cor 11:3 as meaning “source.” Following the order of the Pauline text, GI proponents often assert that Paul’s order – Christ, man, God – is chronological. Christ is the source of man in creation, man was the source of woman in creation, and God is the source of the incarnate Christ. In the GI interpretation, Paul’s order of listing the heads – Christ, man, God – is not conducive to the chain-of-authority interpretation asserted in the GE view since God’s headship is mentioned last. Additionally, the GI view suggests that if “head” means “source,” then we have no basis for the more hierarchal interpretation favored by GE advocates. GI expositors tend to appeal to extra-biblical historical data that they believe illuminate the specific cultural and historical factors Paul was addressing. While the GI advocates do offer a holistic view of the passage, it does seem at times that they are more focused on rebutting the GE headship model than on actually showing what the text means.

At the onset of my studies for this essay, I found neither of the above approaches acceptable, having my own alternative which aligned reasonably closely with the ESV translation, and which turned out to be just as weak as the first two options. In short, I was trying to force 1 Cor 11 to match the marriage use of “head” in Eph 5. Up to this point, I had been lazy with this passage, depending on either Eph 5, or on commentaries and scholarly literature to supply extra-biblical data for the setting of the text. In our last committee on ordination and women, however, I recommitted to seeking the black-and-white picture that emerges solely from the text instead of running to extra-biblical sources prematurely. This recommitment meant I had to put aside all agendas and grapple with the text alone. Here is what I found.

The most striking feature of the passage is that whatever Paul meant by the headship statements in 1 Cor 11:3, and by the creation theology in verses 7-8, in this passage Paul himself does not apply these points by restricting certain authoritative functions only for men. Instead, both men and women pray and prophesy without any stated distinction in importance, role, or significance. Rather than regulating spiritual authority based on gender, Paul applies these principles to how each gender should groom their anatomical heads while performing the same spiritual functions in public worship. GE advocates thus go beyond Paul without textual justification, applying the text in a radically differing way than Paul does. *Any* extraction of a male-headship principle from these verses which excludes women from certain spiritual functions is the *expositor’s interpretation*, not Paul’s. Paul makes no such restriction in this passage.

I believe forcing the application of 1 Cor 11 beyond Paul’s stated usage is problematic. By so doing, GE expositors appear to be committing the same error they make in 1 Tim 2:13 (see Essay 3). They unwittingly ascribe their own opinion to Paul, thus unintentionally investing *their interpretation* of Paul with canonical authority. The Quasi-Paul created in 1 Tim 2 reappears here and again is used to ground the same conclusion, namely an alleged “creation order” of male headship authority over female. Again, I affirm these GE advocates intend no foul play with the text. Quasi-Paul is an accidental creation but nonetheless is not Paul, and thus should not be invested with normative authority. While what Paul meant in this passage is debatable, it is abundantly clear that Paul makes no application of these headship verses in any way compatible with the GE view. The GE interpretation is thus again without textual support, being dependent on Quasi-Paul for its existence. For this reason, this essay could end right here, as the GE position fails without Quasi-Paul’s support. Paul gives no basis on which to build the GE position. Nevertheless, I shall continue with a careful analysis of the text to see what additional light it brings to this discussion.

Looking solely at the text, one of the first things I noticed was a usage cluster of the word, “glory” (*doxa*). “Glory” (*doxa*) appears twice in verse 7 and again in verse 15. Broadening the search, I noted that in 1 Corinthians, “glory” (*doxa*) appears concentrated into three verse groups. Group 1 finds two uses in 1 Cor 2:7-8. Group 3 has six occurrences in 15:40, 41, 43. Group 2 is found in our current passage, having four uses in 10:31; 11:7, 15. Such clearly delineated

clustering indicates some kind of literary relationship between 10:31 and the uses of *doxa* in chapter 11. 1 Cor 10:31 calls us to do all to the glory of God. What, then, does it mean to do all to the “glory” of God?

In this context, glory is not luminescent brightness but is honorific attention, in this case directed toward God.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the injunction to do all to God’s glory is applied in 1 Cor 10:32 by exhorting the Corinthians to give no offense to Jews, Greeks (Gentiles), or to the Church of God. Causing public offense is the opposite of bringing glory to God. This exhortation to avoid causing offense plays a key role in understanding the ensuing verses in 1 Cor 11.

Paul declares that a man who prays and prophesies with a covered head, presumably in the public worship service, “shames [*kataisxuno*] his head” (11:4). Likewise the woman with uncovered head “shames [*kataisxuno*] her head” (11:5). Paul further develops his argument concerning the woman by declaring that if she will not cover her head, she might as well shave her head, which is “a disgrace” (*aisxros* - filthy, shameful). Paul thus seems to appeal to a common standard of decency jointly recognized by Paul and the church, and likely advocated by society at large. This standard, however, is not explicitly defined for the current reader. Nevertheless, it seems contextually clear that improper grooming of the head while one prays or prophesies would, at minimum, cause offense in the church, and would likely also cause public offense to Jews, Gentiles, or both. Paul thus appears to be elaborating on his previous call to glorify God by not offending Jews or Gentiles.

This point is reinforced by Paul’s later appeal to “nature” which declares that men should have short hair and women long hair (11:14-15). The appeal to nature (*phusis*) suggests a universal, commonly accepted norm. Of the 14 uses of *phusis* in the NT, 12 are in Paul’s writings, especially in Romans. Paul uses the term for designating same sex eroticism as “against nature” (Rom 1:26) in the context of the Gentiles rebelling against God’s revelations through the creation. Paul also uses *phusis* of the “natural” versus wild branches in Rom 11: 21, 24. *Phusis*, then, appears to be something discernable by both Jew and Gentile, thus reinforcing the sense that in 1 Corinthians, Paul is making an appeal to common, wide-spread standards. By abandoning common standards of decency for head grooming while in public worship, the Corinthian church members were not bringing glory to God. Instead, they were causing offense in the church, and likely to outsiders as well.

The concern in chapter 11 for causing offense to unbelieving Jews and Gentiles coheres well with the larger pattern of scandalous activity found throughout 1 Corinthians. An obvious example would be the incest incident in 1 Cor 5 which offended not just Jews but even pagans (1 Cor 5:1). This is followed by the need to warn church members not to patronize prostitutes in 1

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 10:31 is closing the exhortations on eating food offered to idols, something with great potential to offend both Jews and Greeks. In the immediate context, eating and drinking to the glory of God is to follow Paul’s counsels on self-restraint, not to eat if it causes another to fall.

Cor 6, a definite offense to Jews. Food offered to idols (1Cor 8-10) gave opportunity to offend both Jews (pricking their sensitivity to idols), and Gentiles (who might see having a Christian eating in their temple feast as an act of desecration). Paul's pattern of confronting church behaviors that caused moral offense continues in his arguments concerning head coverings. Somehow, the use of gender-inappropriate head coverings brings dishonor and shame, offends others and thus fails to bring glory to God.

Paul appears to organize the head-covering issue into three major parts, each with a similar pattern, addressing the man first, then the woman. I diagram this pattern as follows:

1. Statements of facts:
  - a. Men with covered head disgrace their head (11:4)
  - b. Women with uncovered heads disgrace their heads, are shameful (11:5-6)
2. Rationale justifying the facts: Part 1:
  - a. A man ought not cover his head because:
    - i. Man is the image and glory of God (vs 7)
    - ii. Woman is the glory of man
    - iii. Man was not made from woman (vs 8)
    - iv. Woman was made from man
    - v. Man was not made for woman (vs 9)
    - vi. Woman was made for man
  - b. Woman is to have authority over her head "because of angels" (vs 10)<sup>2</sup>
3. Parenthetical Interlude on Interdependence of man and woman (vs 11-12)
4. Rationale justifying the facts: Part 2
  - a. Judge for yourselves what is proper for a woman (vs 13)
    - i. Natural Order for Man: long hair is disgraceful for man (vs 14)
    - ii. Natural Order for Woman: long hair is her glory (*doxa*), her hair is her covering.

Paul's rationale, especially in vs 7-9, follows an analogical argument style demonstrated in Romans.

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<sup>2</sup>Who these "angels" are is much debated. In my view, the best explanation I have seen in the footnote for this verse in my ESV Bible: "Or *messengers*, that is, people sent to observe and report." That is, visitors purposefully coming in order to gather information to report to other churches, to the neighborhood, etc. The early church apparently had their versions of *Advocate* and *Spectrum*, reporting on various controversies in the world church.

In Rom 4, Paul grounds righteousness by faith in Abraham through an argument from analogy. He cites Gen 15:6, where Abraham's faith was in God's promise that he would sire his own son and become the father of many nations. While Abraham shows he believed in substitutionary sacrifice and atonement—see Gen 22 and the sacrifice of Isaac—Paul does not build his case for faith in Christ from any sacrificial typology in Abraham's experience. Rather, he builds the case analogically. Abraham's faith in God to give him a son functions like our faith in Christ to give us justification. Like Abraham, we are justified by believing the promise, not by performance. If we believe in Christ like Abraham believed God's promise of a son, we will be justified in the same way.

In like manner, in Rom 9-11, Paul argues for God's freedom to elect whomever He wishes to salvation. He does so by making an analogical argument from the election of Jacob over Esau and of Pharaoh. Both are elections to mission, not to salvation or damnation. Jacob was graciously elected to the role of progenitor of the messiah and likewise Pharaoh to show off God's power and glory. (Pharaoh could not avoid being an instrument to show off God's power, but he could choose how he would do that. Had Pharaoh led Egypt to become a new tribe in Israel, that certainly would have shown off God's power)! Thus, Paul argues by analogy from election to mission to establish God's freedom to elect Gentiles to salvation without first becoming Jewish.

I believe Paul is making a similar type of analogical argument in 1 Cor 11, especially in Rationale Part 1 (1 Cor 11:7-9). The issue under discussion is the ability of men and women to detract from God's glory by focusing attention on themselves through scandalous grooming of the head. Paul appears to make an analogy in reference to glorifying God by using the creation sequence of Gen 2. Man, the male, is the image and glory of God. His creation story draws our attention solely to God. When one reviews how God formed him from the ground and breathed life into him, there are no other persons or features to distract our attention from marveling at how God made the man. All the honorific attention is directed to God. Hence man is the glory of God.

Woman's creation, however, is different. Her creation story is oriented primarily towards the man. She was made in response to the man's need of a mate, was taken from his side, and was brought to the man. Our attention is primarily drawn to Adam. The story of the woman's creation focuses much more honorific attention on the man than on God. Hence, Paul calls her the glory of the man. The source theology of verses 8-9 reinforces this concept. Woman is taken from man, not vice versa, again focusing the honorific attention on the man. Since the man was not taken from anyone, his story directs the honor and glory directly to God. Paul's logic seems to invest the woman with more inherent power to distract from God than the man. Why? Rationale 2 helps clarify that.

In Rationale 2, Paul shifts to the language of hair, perhaps shedding light on the question of what Paul means by the terms we translate as "covered" and "uncovered" in reference to the

head. Nature teaches that long hair on a man is a disgrace. By contrast, nature teaches long hair is a woman's "glory" (vs 15).

With the reappearance of "glory" in verse 15, Paul further adds to the previous argument that the woman has more power to distract from God's glory than the man. Her hair is her "glory," that is, it has the power to divert honorific attention to herself. In the context of praying and prophesying in public worship, the wrong hair style would divert the worshipers' attention from the glory that should go to God. Additionally, however, it acts as her covering or cloak.<sup>3</sup> Thus, her hair can draw undue attention, causing offense, or it can fulfil the natural order by providing modesty which deflects glory to God. Today, a woman can achieve such distractions by publicly leading worship while clothed in immodest, provocative clothing, or with a distracting hair style, all of which distracts from God's glory. The congregation remembers her fashion (or lack thereof) more than God, thus causing offense.

It is interesting that the rare word for "uncovered" (*akatakaluptos*) occurs only twice in the NT, with both found in 1 Cor 11 (once each for the man and the woman). It is used once more in the Septuagint (LXX).<sup>4</sup> In Lev 13:45, *akatakaluptos* is applied to lepers not covering their head as part of signaling their plight. The Hebrew words rendered with *akatakaluptos* are a loose phrase, *para' rosh*, literally meaning to hang loose (the hair of) the head. This Hebrew phrase is associated with long and perhaps unruly hair and, interestingly, is used once of a woman accused of adultery. The priest was to *para' rosh* – unbind her hair to hang loose – and proceed with the ceremony vetting her innocence. This may suggest Paul had some kind of unruly hair style in mind where our Bibles use the language of a woman having her head uncovered. Thus, Paul's suggested solution for undisciplined head grooming was to declare that the woman is to have authority over her head (vs 10). She should have control of her head and hair so it does not draw attention away from God's glory.<sup>5</sup>

The Mosaic texts on long hair may enlighten our understanding of the odd term in verse 4 where a man who prays and prophesies with "coming down off the head" (*kata kephale*). In light

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<sup>3</sup>This is not the same Greek word as head coverings in the previous verses. It is only used twice in the NT, but in the Septuagint (LXX) translation of the OT, it is used frequently as a noun describing the function of covering or for a garment such as a cloak.

<sup>4</sup>The Septuagint (LXX) is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, finished roughly two centuries before the time of Christ. The name "Septuagint" comes from the number 70, as the translation was ascribed to a team of 70 rabbis. Hence the abbreviation is the Roman numeral for 70, LXX.

<sup>5</sup>Many modern translations say the woman should have a "symbol of authority" on her head, but the Greek text says no such thing. The text literally translates that "she should have authority over her head." Certainly here, "head" is her personal anatomy, not a male leader over her, as this latter view makes no contextual sense.

of the Pentateuchal passages, 1 Cor 11 would likely indicate that the man was grooming his hair long like a woman, publicly feminizing himself, which would be scandalous. To make a contemporary illustration, if a male preacher entered the pulpit dressed and groomed as a woman from head to foot – long hair, bright lipstick, makeup, blouse, skirt, nylons, high heels, etc. – would not such an action distract from the glory of God? Many would be offended and nearly all would forget the content of the sermon.

In addition, verses 5-6 suggest that some women might have been cutting their hair short like men, diminishing their femininity. Likewise, Paul condemns (vs 13-14) men having long hair, diminishing their masculinity. Such a man would be grooming himself like a woman. Gender-bending grooming by both the men and women in the church violates the common morality to which Paul appeals. These concerns for gender-appropriate grooming and attire may suggest that Paul's concern was partly grounded in the Deuteronomic law that gender identity not be compromised by how we dress and adorn ourselves (Deut 22:5). Thus Paul recognized that these practices were publicly disgraceful. As such, they would offend Jews and/or Greeks, thus subverting God's glory.

Paul has made his argument from the analogy of creation, asserting that while men and women can each distract from God's glory, the woman inherently has more power to do so. Thus, the man who makes long hair his glory (like a woman) violates his creation purpose for glorifying God, instead centering the attention on himself. In like manner, the woman who adopts an inappropriate style of head grooming – whether uncontrolled hair or a radically masculine hairdo – has power to divert glory from God to herself. Thus, she should have control (authority, vs 10) over her head grooming so as to bring glory to God, not to herself.

Paul's core argument from verses 4-15 seems clear and discernable, even though we do not have all the historical context given in the text. He seems to be correcting some kind of problem with dress and adornment in public worship that detracts from doing all to the glory of God. What, then, are we to make of the threefold statement on headship in verse 3? How does that trilogy fit into the overall theme of "glory?" The GE interpretation of headship has already been eliminated for it ranges beyond Paul's application of whatever verse 3 means. In addition, the order of the three parts of the headship statement—Christ heads man, man heads woman, God heads Christ—is not conducive to creating a sense of a chain of command. Would not God be highest and woman lowest in the GE model? Why is God mentioned last and woman in the middle?

This same order of man-woman-God undermines my original attempt to force the husband-wife dynamic of Eph 5 into this verse. Eph 5 does not link the headship/submission requirements for husband and wife to God's glory in any overt way, nor does it address women as a general class (it addressed only married women) as seems to be the case in 1 Cor 11. The marriage focus and headship/submission themes in Eph 5 seem entirely absent in 1 Cor 11. Attempts to force Eph 5 into the picture thus seem unprofitable.

Those in the GI camp advocating the head-as-source interpretation allege verse 3 is listed in chronological order. Christ created the man first, then woman was taken from man, and finally the incarnation. I have to admit that for me this argument for chronological order seems the least fraught with problems, but that still did not solve the relationship of verse 3 to the ensuing passage.

The keen observer will note that I have not addressed the parenthetical interlude of verses 11-12. Here we find an interesting barrage of source language. Paul seems to be trying to combat a misuse of his argument that would denigrate a woman as inferior to a man based on what he just said about their creation. He now emphasizes their interdependence through the analogy that as woman came out of man as her source in the creation, now man comes through the woman as his source. Each is dependant on the other, neither exists independently of the other, with both being equally important. This is underscored by the clinching comment, “all comes from God,” meaning God is source of all. And then I noticed something.

These two verses (11-12) contain all three elements of verse 3. If woman came from man (part 2 of the trilogy in vs 3), man had to come from somewhere. Hence part 1 of the trilogy is implied – man was made first, and in light of Paul’s creation theology, this makes Christ the sole source of man’s origin. In like manner, woman comes from man as her source through God’s creative act. Thus we appear to clearly have the same contents as first two thirds of the trilogy from verse 3. Paul then concludes this sequence with “all comes from God.” This seems to parallel the third part of the trilogy – God is head of Christ. With all three parts of verses 11-12 using the same language – “comes from,” (Greek *ek*) – it seems safe to conclude that they are all connoting the concept of source. Additionally, having the same three-source sequence in verses 11-12 as found in verse 3 suggests their literary connection. It seems safe to conclude that verses 11-12 are, to a great degree, restating verse 3.

Much to my chagrin, it appears that the major basis of the argument in Rationale 1 and in the interlude is “source” theology. In verses 11-12, Paul is likely restating vs 3 into source language as shown in the previous paragraph. Additionally, by his further development of the source theology towards the interdependence of man and woman, it suggests that some kind of aberrant “source” theology was being used by Corinthian women to throw off social norms of decent grooming. Precisely what that improper source theology was, is not made clear in the biblical text, except it appears to have something to do with Eve. Paul thus appears to try to correct it with a proper “source” theology. We do not need to know, however, exactly what Paul was opposing to get Paul’s basic point, namely that he casts male-female gender relations in highly egalitarian terms based on this corrective source theology. For Paul, the source theology is thus ultimately about our collective dependence on our ultimate source, God. Christ-as-man demonstrated the proper application of dependence on God for us, through a life based on other values than hierarchal power over others (Phil 2:5-7; 2 Cor 8:9; 1 Cor 9; Mat 20:25-28). This means that males should not develop a superiority complex regarding females since both depend on and come from each other and since both are equally dependent on God. The egalitarian



overtone of this passage are stunning, reinforcing the fact that Paul makes gender-based restriction of function in this larger passage.

I still struggled with accepting a source theology in 1 Cor 11 until I read Exo 6:14: “These are the heads of their fathers' houses: the sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel: Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi; these are the clans of Reuben.” In the ensuing verses, the heads of the clans of Simeon and Levi are named. At the time of the Exodus, most of these “heads” were long dead. Their headship could not be a functioning form of authority since “the dead know nothing . . . and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:6 ESV). The point of Exo 6 is that these were the *sources* – the fountainheads– of the clans in each tribe. Hence there are rare cases of head-as-source in scripture, which made it easier to surrender my cherished view to what is actually in the text of 1 Cor 11.

In summary, then, Paul seems to be combating some kind of source theology based on Eve, which was being used to justify personal grooming behaviors that offended Jews and Greeks, thus detracting from God’s glory. Additionally, Paul’s strong egalitarian emphasis might imply that the suspect source theology may have been used to justify some kind of viewpoint in which the female was viewed as superior to the male. These value inversions were expressed partly through non-traditional head grooming that caused offense to Jew and Greek, thus doing the opposite of glorifying God. Paul responds by correcting their source theology with a biblical one, which he applies to an egalitarian relationship between the genders, with no gender-based restrictions in spiritual authority or function. Instead, Paul instructs the Corinthians to comply with common standards of decency so as to glorify God by not causing offense in the church, or to Jews and Greeks outside the church. To try to extract hierarchy of authority and function based on gender from this text goes beyond Paul’s own application of his own theological argument, raising concerns about the veracity of the hermeneutics used to surpass Paul.