

FEMALES AND FAITHFUL FOOD PAUL ON WOMEN AND COMMUNION IN 1 COR 11

PREPGUIDE

by Dr. Allen Hilton

PART ONE: WOMEN PROPHETS IN THE CHURCH OF CORINTH

Two of Paul's most infamous passages (or famous, depending on who's talking) appear here in chapter 11.3 ("The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.") and in 14.33 -35 ("Let women be silent in the church!"). Both of these passages relate to the central theme of prophecy, which is Paul's most favored "spiritual gift", as it plays out in 1 Corinthians 11-14. In this session, we'll focus first on 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 first, turning our attention to the latter text as it becomes relevant.

1 Cor 11.2-16 is as fascinating as it is confusing. Here Paul speaks to the order of the community's prophets and delineates them by gender, but he starts with a more general statement about the relationship of men and women to one another and to God.

*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. (11.3)*

The words should jolt anyone who has read the first ten chapters of this letter. The only name we've seen so far, of any Corinthian, is "Chloe", with her famous "people", in 1.10. Then, in chapter 7, we watched as Paul presented marriage as a gender-level enterprise, with wives having the same prerogatives as husbands – an equality that we noticed at the time to be

almost unparalleled in the writings we have from antiquity. So, when we run into the stratified order of 11.3, it stands out and prompts curiosity.

We'll walk through Paul's argument for this order verse by verse on Monday. We'll also put it in the context of Paul's other writing on women in 1 Cor and beyond. For now, though, let's briefly track Paul's case.

Initial Claim

God is the Head of...

Christ, who is the Head of...

Man, who is the Head of....

Woman.

Consequences of the Claim

As Paul shares his counsel, he will use the word "head" to describe two different entities: the figurative head (probably meaning a superior or authority in the chain of being) and the anatomical head. To keep our meanings straight, I'll use "head" for the first and "headwear" for the second (meaning either long hair or some sort of head cover).

A praying or prophesying Man must have no headwear. (v. 4)

A praying or prophesying Woman must have headwear. (v. 5)

Violation by either will dishonor their Head.

(Continued specification in v. 6 about the specific options and ramifications for women may mean that the behavior Paul is trying to change is theirs.)

Argument #1: 11.7 → Genesis 1.27

In 11.7-12 move our focus to Genesis 1 and 2. Paul starts with Genesis 1.27, the famous proclamation that

"God created humankind in his own image,

in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Paul argues that a man ought to have headwear and a woman no headwear because...

- ❖ Man is the “image” and “glory” of God. (Gen 1.27)
- ❖ Woman is the “glory” of Man.

Two Notes about This:

1. The word “humankind” suits both the Hebrew text and Greek translation of 1.27, both of which use a word that encompasses all humanity. (Hebrew: ZAKAR; Greek: ANTHROPOS). Then for “male and female” both use gendered words. (Hebrew: NEQEBA; Greek: ANÊR and GUNÉ)
2. The word “glory” does not appear in any of our English translations of the Hebrew, but the Greek word for “glory” (DOXA) appears in ancient Greek translations of Genesis that would have been available to Paul.)

Note 1 reminds us that by making the “image” gender-specific to men, Paul seems to be moving the meaning of the text. He may be relying on rabbinic commentary and conversation to which we don’t have access.

Argument #2: 11.8 -9 → Genesis 2.21-24

Next, Paul turns to the story of Eve being formed from an already fully operative Adam in the Garden of Eden.

“For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” (11.8-9)

Paul infers from this that “A man should cover his head.” (11.7)

Argument #3: 11.10 → “Because of the Angels”

When he calls on “the angels” as a warrant for women to “have [a sign of?] authority over her own head” (11.10), Paul is not quoting any passage precisely. In Psalm 8, the psalmist marvels that “You have made humans a little lower than the angels,” but the two genders are not specified. Commentators chase around a bit to seek Paul’s meaning.

A Brief Interruption on Gender Interconnection (11.11 - 12)

To close this striking paragraph, and a bit against the grain of what has gone before, Paul states the mutual reliance between the two genders. To do it, he returns to the order of Genesis 2, coupled with women’s role as child -bearers.

“Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.”

Argument #4: 11.13 - 15 → From Nature and Common Sense

Now, Paul returns to his regularly scheduled programming and argues one last time for the behavior he is demanding. This time, he calls on the Corinthians’ common sense as they reflect on “the nature of things”.

Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.

Argument #5: 11.16 → Everybody’s Doing It

Finally, in an appeal Paul will use again in this letter, Paul warns the Corinthians against going rogue by allowing women prophets and prayers not to have headwear.

If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice —nor do the churches of God. (11.16)

Here Paul exhorts the Corinthians to comply with the general practice of Christ-followers in the other churches.

He laid groundwork for this appeal in his greeting, where he tells the Corinthians that they have been, “called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ —their Lord and ours.”

He will return to it in chapter 14.33. There, he again exhorts the Corinthians to join the practices of “all the congregations of the Lord’s people”.

The specific pairing of this appeal can be understood in two ways:

1. The NIV connects the mention of other communities with Paul’s command that prophets not dominate the “floor”, but to yield it to fresh voices.
2. The NRSVUE connects it with what comes after it: Paul’s exhortation that “women should be silent in the churches”.

We will look more closely Monday evening at this editorial decision of the translators.

For our purposes here, Paul caps his arguments about men’s and women’s headwear by citing the general practice of Christians everywhere.

PART TWO: FOOD FIGHTS

In 1 Corinthians 11.17-34, Paul flashes anger that seems much more intense than his concern for the headwear of prophets and prayers. Because of his intense concern, he offers his most extensive treatment of the early Christian practice of the Lord’s Supper – and the most detailed specific instructions about the conduct of the meal that we have in scripture. I will treat this text more briefly here, because it is not as controversial or as confusing as our chapter’s first half. In this Prep Guide and on Monday evening, we’ll address the passage in three parts:

The Problematic Behavior

Paul's disapproval of the Corinthians' conduct of the Supper is clear from the start. But what are they doing wrong? Paul describes the offending practice directly in 11.20-21:

When you come together...when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk.

In Paul's view, this "divided" and individual behavior has completely changed the nature of the meal:

"It is not the Lord's Supper you eat!" (11.20)

The impact of this is not insignificant. It not only misses the point of the Lord's Supper, it mars the whole gathering.

"Your meetings do more harm than good..." (11.17) by *"humiliating those who have nothing"* (11.22)

He shames the offending, probably well-to-do hoarders, by reminding them that they have options that would keep them from this sin against the body of Christ.

"Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?" (11.22)

The Tradition

To remedy the Corinthians' scandalous disregard for one another, Paul takes them back to the basics that they learned when he was first with them.

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of

me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

These words are familiar to most of us, because they are widely used by those who serve at the table in churches across the world. Paul emphasizes that this is by no means new information to them.

The final line of this recounting of tradition may be the spear point of Paul’s correction: the meal is a community’s way (the Greek verb for “proclaim” is plural) of proclaiming the good news of Jesus’s death and ultimate return. This communal messaging about Jesus has been replaced by a free -for -all in which participants disregard and so abuse their brothers and sisters in the name of their own enjoyment.

Unworthy Eating (11.27 -32)

For centuries, scads of faithful folks have refrained from communion because of Paul’s grave cautionary language in this passage. And Christian leaders have often fed this fear, exhorting their flocks to a deep spiritual inventory before deciding whether they are worthy of the meal.

This error might have been avoided if the church had not taken this passage out of context. So we will read this bearing in mind the specific sin Paul has named.

Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.

The sin in view is the specific mis -estimation of the body that he has just described. The body is the living -room full of Christians Paul is addressing, which Paul calls the body here and in 1 Cor 12 – the very next passage in the letter. The sin is a violation of community that hasn’t valued poorer members and so shamed them. If preachers and leaders through the centuries had

focused on this instead of some general self -examination, the historic Christian church would have behaved much differently through the centuries!

The Simple Correction

Paul provides the prescription for what ails the Corinthian church in the last verses of chapter 11, and it is simple.

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

They missed the mark by seeing their meetings as a first -come, first -served eatery, rather than a communal meal. The fix is easy. The habits of an economically, socially, and spiritually diverse and connected community are not, as we shall see in 1 Corinthians 12–14.

Looking Forward to Monday

I'm excited to take on this 11th chapter of 1 Cor with you on Monday evening. For now, I have put the women prophets in a wider context in the addendum below. We'll get back to it together. For now...

Peace.
allen

The Female Prophets of 11 and the Silencing of Women in 1 Cor 14.

Paul's direct attention to women prophets in Corinth is both telling and ironic, because it will be a mere three chapters later that he speaks words which most have interpreters have read as if they never encountered the women prophets of chapter 11.

The full quotation goes like this:

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Corinthians 14.33-35)

Too many Bible readers simply stop here and either (on the conservative side) silence women or (on the progressive side) stamp Paul: "REJECTED" "OUT OF TOUCH" "IRRELEVANT"

So, did Paul want women to shut up in church? Let's dig deeper, because this issue provides a powerful lesson in the necessity of always reading Bible verses in context.

Question 1: Did women participate in Paul's ministry?

Answer 1: Yes!

In Romans 16, where Paul greets a laundry list of friends and fellow workers, he mentions: "our sister Phoebe, a deacon in the church at Cenchrea (just outside Corinth)...Prisca, who works with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked [her] neck for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles....Greet Mary, who has worked hard among you...Greet...Junia, who was in prison with me and is prominent among the apostles..." And the list goes on. The list of Paul's female "co-workers" in ministry is remarkable, and he sets them right next to (in fact in front of) the male co-workers. In this letter, in fact, Paul mentions his conversation with a group of people associated with a Christian leader named "Chloe."

Question 2: Did Paul want women to speak in worship leadership in Corinth?

Answer 2: Yes!

Prophets were Paul's favorite truth-tellers in his churches: people who brought God's word to play in the context of their worship time together. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul urges the Corinthians to prize prophecy over all the spiritual gifts. And in 1 Corinthians 11, he treats the question how prophets should wear their hair or hats while prophesying. That have been an opportune time for Paul to say, "Only men can prophesy!" Instead, he goes to great (and somewhat strained) lengths to make way for female prophets. In other words, the ministry Paul recommended above all others was being carried out by Corinthian women prophets.

These two facts help us when we return to the "Let women be silent in the church." Our options:

1. Paul is blatantly self-contradictory, urging women to speak in church in chapter 11 and then forbidding them to speak in church in chapter 14.
2. Paul didn't write 1 Cor 14.33-35, which was added by a later editor along the way. (Some scholars have proposed this, though there is no manuscript evidence for it.)
3. Paul does not mean his "...silent..!" absolutely, but rather speaks here to a specific situation he and the Corinthians both understand, but we may not.

Most likely, the right answer is #3. The setting is a worship gathering. Paul is explaining how God conducts worship through the people God has gifted to lead. Three times in that context, Paul uses the Greek verb SIGATOSAN, which means "let them be silent."

- In 1 Cor 14.27-28, Paul says, "any who begin to speak in a tongue, but have no one present to interpret, let them be silent!" (SIGATOSAN)
- In 1 Cor 14.29-30, Paul says, "any who are prophesying when another member of the group gets a fresh prophetic word from God, let them be silent." (SIGATOSAN)
- In 1 Cor 14.33-35, Paul says, "if women have questions during worship, let them be silent (SIGATOSAN) and ask their questions later."

We saw above that the picture Paul paints is of an orchestrated worship service that is not to be interrupted by personal interest. The same logic that has guided the letter since chapter 6 pertains here: “Defer to the good of the community. Don’t interrupt with your question.”

This picture makes even more sense when we realize how rare it was for women to receive education in the Roman world. A new member of the group sees someone reading from a scroll and interpreting what the “book” says and has questions. For Paul, worship is the chief concern here. Chasing a curiosity can wait.

There is reason for us to be frustrated by this passage, but not by its original meaning. Unfortunately, literalist readings of this passage out of context have been used to restrict the role of women throughout Christian history. Up to the present, even some people who are trying to be faithful to God deny women the opportunity to minister and deny congregations the valuable gifts of women – all because of 1 Corinthians 14.33-35.

I believe this female-limiting interpretation of his letter would grieve Paul. Some of his most effective colleagues and partners were women. I imagine he would have felt very limited if they had not been free to minister alongside him. Paul was not an “enlightened” twenty-first century male. But in the context of male-female relations in first-century Rome, he was veritably liberationist. Women played a key role in his ministry – perhaps even a greater role than they played in Jesus’s ministry; they occupied the most valuable station in Corinthian worship (the prophet) at his urging; and he put women on an equal footing with men in marital relations (7.1-7).

I believe Paul would have cheered the great women leaders of Christianity, from his friends Priscilla and Phoebe and Lydia and Euodia and Syntyche and Junia and Chloe and..., to the 2nd-century martyrs, Perpetua and Felicitas, through the 12th century saint, Hildegard of Bingen, to St. Francis’ female counterpart, St. Claire of Assisi, and on to St. Teresa of Avila and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. I believe he would have wanted to hear Barbara Brown Taylor and Joanna Adams and Lillian Daniel and Nadia Bolz-Weber and Amy Butler preach. I believe he would have listened, and then debated with them.

Whatever your interpretation of Paul's teaching on women, my advice to followers of Jesus is this: keep reading him. Paul can hardly be blamed for the misinterpretation of his letter. And, as we have seen and will see, this well runs deep!