

Take-Aways for Small Group Leaders to Consider

Without doubt, 1 Cor 11:2-16 is one of the most difficult passages to understand in Paul's Letter to the Corinthian church. Scholars who have studied 1 Corinthians for years remain just as confused about this section as someone who is reading it for the first time. What, for example, could Paul possibly mean when he says in v. 10, "For this reason, the woman is obligated to have authority on her head on account of the angels." No one knows what that means. It is important to acknowledge this difficulty of interpretation up front, and not artificially contrive neat ways to circumvent it. Richard Hays puts it this way:

The first principle that should be applied in our readings of this text is the principle of hermeneutical honesty: we should never pretend to understand more than we do. In the case of this passage, the teacher or preacher should be prepared to acknowledge that we can neither understand it entirely nor accept it entirely (the latter perhaps follows from the former). Telling the truth about such matters will do much more to clear the air, and it may help members of our congregations recognize more clearly the great cultural distance between first-century Corinth and our world (Hays, 190).

Nevertheless, there are three important points to emphasize as you read and think through this text together in small group. First, Paul does argue for a created *distinction* between men and women. He claims that when men and women assemble to pray and prophesy together, it is shameful for men to cover their heads and shameful for women *not* to cover their heads, and he claims this "shamefulness" is somehow related to realities intrinsic to the biological order (vv. 7-10; v. 14). To blur genuine gender distinctions in the community's worship is to open the door to confusion and distraction and also bring shame upon the community's life together. "A healthy community needs men and women together (v. 11), not a group of people striving for sexless neutrality" (Hays, 191). Paul's overriding concern is to preserve the dignity of both men and women in the community—the same way we might say to a friend who showed up to church only in a bathrobe, "I don't want you to bring shame upon yourself ... a bathrobe really isn't appropriate to wear in a public space like this."

But second, and here we must punctuate the point, Paul argues for a Christological *equality* between men and women. He assumes, for instance, that when men and women assemble to pray and prophesy together, that *both* men and women will lead in worship and participate in community leadership. That Paul expects women to *prophesy* is especially significant, since this included the act of preaching the word of the Lord. In this respect, Paul's directive for women to cover their heads can and should be read as a directive that *enables* and *empowers* women to preach and "have authority" (v. 10). And even if we follow Paul's directive about maintaining the created *distinction* between men and women, Paul's profound "Nevertheless!" in v. 11 makes it clear that this created distinction does not imply superiority or inferiority, but instead is meant to engender mutual interdependence between the sexes. After all, though it is certainly true that "woman comes *from* the man," it is also true that the "man comes *through* the woman." And what matters most of all for Paul is this: "All things come *from* God" (v. 12). Whatever relative difference there is between men and women, it cannot compare to the absolute difference between God and humans. In the Lord, men and women are equal in their service to God.

Third, and finally, the whole context of the passage within Corinthians makes it clear **that at stake for Paul is worship that is orderly and not chaotic**. He exhorts women to cover their heads and for men to keep their heads uncovered *so that* the prayers and prophetic proclamation can be offered up to God equally by men and women in the church without setting up an unnecessary and distracting stumbling blocks.

CONVERSATION GUIDE

1. Take 5-10 minutes to discuss this week's sermon,

INTRO TO THE TEXT

In this difficult passage, Paul is addressing a situation that had evidently arisen specifically in the church of Corinth, where certain women, when publicly praying or prophesying in the assembly, removed the cover from their heads and exposed their hair. The issue at play may be more easily understood if we recall that Paul belonged to a time of extraordinary modesty, in which a woman's full head of hair was regarded as among the chief beauties of her sex; so, a woman's uncovered head in public, especially in places of worship, was seen both as a showy exhibition and as an ill-mannered provocation (just as, today, immodest dress is discouraged in many places of worship). But even more significantly, for a woman to remove her head covering in worship and for a man to put on a head covering, would be to discard a traditional marker of gender distinction.

Paul's response to this issue is notoriously tricky, involving an argument about what is the natural order of all things (vv. 3, 7-9) and what is naturally shameful/glorious for men and women (vv. 4-6, 13-15). In between these bookends about what is natural, Paul offers a Christological reason for thinking that, though there are legitimate created and natural distinctions that exist between men and women, nonetheless in the Lord (Jesus) men and women are mutually dependent on one another and are both expected to participate in the official leadership of the church's worship.

READ 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 (on next page)

ANALYZE THE TEXT

1. What does Paul assume that *both* men and women will do in the Christian assembly in vv. 4-5?
2. What is the deep issue at stake in Paul's discussion of women covering their heads and men not covering their heads? (see vv. 4-6).
3. Verse 10 is tricky. Some translations make it seem that Paul is arguing that women ought to have a symbol of being under authority on her head. But a better translation is: "the woman ought to have authority over her head because of the angels." In

other words, for Paul women ought themselves to take control of their heads by covering them up. How might this change the meaning of the directive?

4. What is so surprising about vv. 11-12? How do these verses expand and make more complex what Paul said in vv. 3-10?

A FEW THINGS TO CONSIDER

One, Paul affirms that there is a *created difference* between men and women, and that the blurring of this difference (women uncovering their heads, and men covering their heads in worship) is liable to bring shame on the community. Two, Paul affirms a *Christological equality* between men and women: both men and women will participate in the leadership of praying and prophesying in the church. This is significant because prophecy would include preaching the word of the Lord. Even more, he claims that, though men and women are distinct, they are nonetheless mutually dependent on each other *in the Lord*. The sum of the matter: Both men and women are free to pray and prophesy and participate in leadership of the church, so long as they maintain the external marks of gender difference, particularly as it concerns head covering.

APPLY

1. Paul clearly sees a *created difference* between men and women even as he argues for *Christological equality* between men and women in the Lord. What might it look like for us to live out *both* these things in our community today? (i.e. women are meant to be in formal leadership positions just like men BUT we still affirm there are gender differences between men and women celebrate those differences).

MEMORIZE 1 Corinthians 11: 11-12

FURTHER READING: Leviticus 19 (specifically 19:18), Galatians 5 (specifically 5:13), Romans 12 (specifically 10:10), Philippians 2 (specifically 2:3)

When you see your brother or sister in the Lord, consider him or her as someone whom you depend on, someone whom you can't live well without, and someone whose burdens you are called to bear.

1 Corinthians 11:2-16**Translated by Jimmy Myers, Director of Discipleship**

² I applaud all of you for remembering me in all things, and that you are holding fast to the traditions, just as I handed them on to you. ³ Now I want you to know that the Christ is the head of every man, the man is head of woman, and God is head of the Christ. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with something on the head brings shame upon his head. ⁵ And every woman who prays or prophesies with uncovered head brings shame upon her head—it is the same thing as having her head shaved. ⁶ For if a woman doesn't cover herself, then let her cut her hair off! But if it is shameful for a woman to cut off her hair or to be shaved, let her cover her head! ⁷ For, on the one hand, a man is not obligated to cover the head, since he is the image and glory of God. And, on the other hand, the woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For a man does not come from a woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Yes, for a man is not created on account of the woman but a woman on account of the man. ¹⁰ For this reason, the woman is obligated to have authority on her head on account of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man and man is not independent of woman. ¹² For just as the woman comes *from* the man, so also the man comes *through* the woman. And all things come *from* God. ¹³ Judge among yourselves! Is it appropriate for a woman to pray to God with uncovered head? ¹⁴ Doesn't nature herself teach you that it is dishonorable for a man to have long hair, ¹⁵ and it is glorious for a woman to have long hair? For long hair is given to her for the purpose of serving as a garment. ¹⁶ And if someone still is argumentative, we have no such habit nor do the assemblies of God.