

7-1-1980

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Recommended Citation

Leske, Adrian M. (1980) "1 Corinthians 11:2-16: exegesis case study," *Consensus*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol6/iss3/2>

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Exegesis Case Study

I CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

Adrian M. Leske

GENERAL CONTEXT

Before we take a look at our particular passage we need to make one or two general observations about Paul. In the first place, Paul was always having to defend his position as an apostle. The authenticity of that title for him was always being questioned. He had not been a participant in the beginning and growth of Christianity. He had not come to experience first hand the Palestinian Christianity of the Twelve. We know from his letter to the Galatians that Paul was only infrequently in touch with Jerusalem and then only for short periods of time. It was in Damascus, that is, in the Jewish Christianity of the Syro-Arabian dispersion that Paul was initiated into Christianity, and he stayed in that area longer than any other place (Gal. 1 & 2).

So he taught in a tension among Jewish Christians between those who saw him as still too much influenced by his rabbinical training in his approach to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and those who felt he was giving up too much of the requirements of Jewish law to allow easy access of Gentiles into the Church. Paul was very conscious of this tension and tried to steer a course through this Scylla and Charybdis. He did not want to place insurmountable barriers before the Gentiles. Nor did he want to alienate the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Part of his reason for the collection was to show Jerusalem that the Gentile churches were very much a part of the church of Jesus Christ by their act of sharing with the “poor among the saints” in Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, while he was conscious of the freedom of the Christian in the gospel, he was also conscious of the need for restraint in demonstrating that freedom in regard to the time-honoured laws and traditions. Naturally enough, when he

felt that that freedom was fast becoming license, he quickly fell back on the law and the traditions. For Paul this was not only a matter of giving no opportunity to his legalistic opponents in Jerusalem to condemn his Gentile mission, but it was also a matter of the proper distinction between law and gospel.

The Corinthians were by no means an easy people to work with. Corinth was renowned for its moral laxity. It was known as the cesspool of the ancient world. The temple of Aphrodite in Corinth with its large number of cult prostitutes undoubtedly contributed to that reputation. Paul had established a congregation of Jews and Gentiles, of rich and poor, slaves and free in this city, a congregation which was to give him more concern than any other. After his departure they became divided into contending parties; some questioned his apostleship; some denied the resurrection; some were taking fellow members to court over property rights; and there was a general tolerance of immorality and license amongst members that was bound to bring the congregation into disrepute.

THE CORINTHIAN LETTERS

From Ephesus Paul wrote the Corinthians a letter, delivered by Titus, in which he warned them against associating with immoral persons (I Cor. 5:9-11). This first letter has for the most part been lost, but it is likely that fragments of it may exist in the two letters we have in our canon. Certainly, 2 Cor. 6:14 - 7:1 does not fit where it has been placed and, since it deals with the subject Paul mentioned in I Cor. 5:9, it probably belongs to the first letter. It is possible that I Cor. 14:33b-35 could have been part of that letter also since it does not fit very well into its present context.¹

After that first letter some members of Chloe's household went to Ephesus and reported to him what was happening in Corinth. Later representatives of the congregation, Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, paid him a visit there and brought him a letter of questions from the congregation to which he refers in I Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1 16:1, 2.

Paul's second letter (our 1 Corinthians) was to answer those questions and raise the real concerns that Paul had as a result of the Chloe family report and their letter to him. When Timothy came back to Paul with bad news concerning their attitude

1. It could be argued, as Hans Conzelmann does (*I Corinthians.*) translated by James Leitch in *Hermeneia Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, p. 246) that this passage belongs to a later time in the history of the New Testament church when the church had consolidated its practices according to general custom. This would make it contemporary with the Pastoral Epistles. Nevertheless, whichever way it is taken three points are clear: (1) It is an interpolation in I Cor. 14. It does not fit well into the context. This was sensed by some manuscript copiers as is clear in D and G and others which transpose it to the end of the chapter. (2) It is in contradiction with I Cor. 11:2-16 where the issue is subordination, and it is assumed that women have the right to pray and prophesy in the church. (3) Paul must have said or written something about the position of women in the church prior to I Corinthians. This was questioned by the congregation who may have reminded him of the Joel prophecy regarding daughters prophesying and the Spirit being poured on maidservants. So Paul responds in I Cor. 11:2-16 by dealing primarily with the issue of subordination and its sign.

to his letter, Paul made a “painful visit” to them as he called it in 2 Cor. 2:1. It was a painful visit because he met with opposition and soon departed for Macedonia. From there he sent a severe letter to them which was taken to them by Titus. That letter probably dealt with the condemnation of individuals and upbraided the congregation as a whole for their laxity. Part of that letter is probably found in 2 Cor. 10-13. Finally, when Titus returned with the good news that they had repented and dealt with the offender, Paul wrote his joyful letter to them (his fourth) which we have in 2 Cor. 1-9 (excluding 6:14-7:1).² One can expect to find a lot more gospel in this last letter as compared to the previous letters. Previously, when the gospel had not been understood, the preaching of law had been necessary. It is important to keep this course of events in mind when looking at 1 Cor. 11:2-16.

EXEGESIS 1 Cor. 11:2-16

After speaking about eating meat offered to idols and advising caution lest they give offense to those who do not understand (“All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful”, 10:23) Paul now turns to another matter which could give offense to those who do not understand freedom in the gospel — the matter of the position of women, particularly in the worship service.

v.2. From ch. 7 on, Paul has been answering questions addressed to him in the letter of the Corinthians brought by Stephanas etc. He now seems to be responding to an assertion in that letter that they have remembered Paul in everything and have maintained the traditions which he had delivered to them.³ Paul praises them for this official attitude of the congregation before going on to deal with the matter that causes him some concern with their practice. *Paradosis* here is almost a technical term for oral tradition. Paul has taken over the term from his Jewish heritage. In Gal. 1:14 he had said that he had been zealous for the “traditions of the fathers”. These are the same rabbinic traditions the Pharisees referred to when they accused Jesus’ disciples of not keeping the “traditions of the elders” (Mt. 15:2; Mk. 7:5). Jesus called them “the tradition of men” by which they make void the Word of God (Mk. 7:8). Paul uses this same phrase in Col. 2:8. But in 2 Thess. 2:15 and 3:6 he appears to have taken over the term to mean the practices within the Christian church as he has handed them down. Paul readily commends them for what they have claimed because he wants them to accept another difficult tradition he is about to set down. He wants them to accept this along the lines of his exhortation in 10:33-11:1: not to seek their own advantage but to imitate him in this matter also.

v.3. “I want you to know” — a favourite phrase of Paul’s when he wants to say something he regards as very serious (cf. Col. 2:1 and also 1 Cor. 10:1 & 12:1). This is followed by the very problematic *kephale* “headship” triad. While everywhere else in Pauline theology Christ is seen as the *kephale ekklesias* “head of the

2. This more conservative approach to the Corinthian correspondence is very adequately set down by A.W. Heathcote, *An Introduction to the Letters of St. Paul* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, c. 1963), pp. 49-56.

3. In agreement with Nils Alstrup Dahl, *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), p. 50.

church" (Eph. 5:23; 4:15; 1:22; 1 Cor. 12), here he is *kephale pantos andros* "head of every male" or "head of every husband." If Paul had already made the statement about wives remaining silent in the churches in his first letter (1 Cor. 14: 31-35) then he is here talking about wives remaining subordinate to their husbands. From reports he has received the Corinthians did not regard the spontaneous praying and prophesying of their women as insubordination or contrary to the traditions which Paul had passed on to them. He is now ready to accede to their speaking in church otherwise he has to deal with the question whether women can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit or not. So he makes subordination his bottom line and seeks a theological basis for it. The argument seems to be: Every husband as the *pater familias* is subordinate to Christ, and even Christ is subordinate to God, so it is part of the order of things for women to be subordinate to their husbands. Comparisons between the various forms of subordination cannot be pressed. Obviously, Christ's subordination to God is different from woman's subordination to her husband.

v.4. *Kata kephales* literally "(something) hanging down from the head" this is, a veil. The second reference to *kephale* in this verse is really a play on the word: he dishonours his head by covering it but he also dishonours Christ, his head, because, as in the cases of Moses, a man must not come into the presence of the Lord with a veil over his face (Ex. 34:34; 2 Cor. 3:16).

v.5. There is no question about a woman praying or prophesying here, but Paul is saying that she do so by keeping her head still covered with a veil. To do otherwise would be to dishonour her husband who is her "head" — another play on words. By removing the veil, Paul is here asserting, the woman would be rejecting her subordination to her husband. According to Jewish custom a woman may only appear in public if her head is covered. Conzelmann gives the following references: "Gn.r.17.8 (12a) in Str.-B. 3:423f: R. Joshua (ca. 90) was asked: Why does a man go out bareheaded while a woman goes out with her head covered?" (*Midrash Rabbah* 1:139); *b.Ned.* 300: "Men sometimes cover their heads and sometimes not; but women's hair is always covered, and children are always bareheaded." (Epstein, 87). For a woman to go out with her head uncovered is a disgrace (3 *Macc.* 4.6) and a ground for divorce, *Ket.* 7.6, etc. (Str.-B. 3:427-434)."⁴

According to Num. 5:18, when a woman was accused of adultery by her husband the priest was to unveil her before subjecting her to certain tests. This was regarded as an act of dishonouring her as punishment for being under suspicion.⁵ In the *Mishnah* (*Baba Kamma* 8:6), if a man unveiled a woman's head in public he would have to pay a severe fine of 400 pieces of silver. However, in Greek or Roman society it was not so clear. Fashions varied. According to Plutarch, Roman custom was for women to have their heads covered in public (Corinth was a Roman colony) but a veil may not have been required of women in worship.⁶ The women of the congregation at Corinth were probably arguing that they could not come before the Lord with their heads veiled for this would inhibit ecstatic utterances in worship. But Paul holds fast to Jewish custom adding that an unveiled woman is

4. Conzelmann, p. 185.

5. Jean Hering, *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (Translated from the Second French Edition by A.W. Heathcote and P.J. Allcock. London: The Epworth press, c. 1962), p. 105.

6. Conzelmann, p. 185.

“one and the same with her whose head is shaved” (perf. pass. part.). For a woman to have had her head shaved was generally a sign of immoral character. It was sometimes the punishment for an adulteress.⁷ So from Paul’s Jewish background, to be without a veil carries the same social implications as having one’s head shaven.

v.6. Paul emphasizes here what he has said in the previous verse: If it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut or head shaven (Paul assumes that this is the opinion of the Corinthians) then it is just as shameful not to wear the veil. It is interesting to note that the wearing of a veil did not appear to become a practice in the New Testament church as 1 Tim. 2:9 and 1 Pet. 3:3 would seem to indicate.

v.7. The *aner* should not wear a veil over his head because he is the image (*eikion*) and glory (*doxa*) of God. It is clear here that Paul is referring to Gen. 1:26 where man (*anthropos*) is created in the image (*eikon*) and likeness (*homoiosis*) of God. Hering therefore argues that *doxa* here probably is a copyist’s error for “dogma” which in Aramaic means a “copy”. Thus the argument would be that while the male is the image and likeness of God, the woman is the likeness of the male.⁸ Whether this aramaic meaning is behind Paul’s use of *doxa* or not, Paul is attempting to combine Gen. 1:26f. with Gen. 2:18ff. as a Jewish midrash. The view of Ellis is more convincing. His view is that Paul is following a rabbinic tradition in speaking about the male as the glory of God and woman as the glory of the male. The rabbis also contrast the sexes as to *doxa*, not as to *eikon* which Gen. 1:27 ascribes to both.⁹ Nevertheless, this rabbinic exegesis used by Paul to hammer home his theme that the woman is subordinate to man must have seemed unconvincing to his readers in the light of Gen. 1:27.

vv.8, 9. Paul, however, in these verses shows that he wants to emphasize Gen. 2:15ff. where woman is seen as created from man to be his helper — clearly a position of inferiority.

v.10. Literally: “Therefore a woman ought to have an authority (*exousia*) on her head on account of the angels.” Dibelius suggests that this “power” or “authority” on her head was the veil which was seen as possessing magic power over spirits which sought to obstruct her when she pressed forward into the heavenly sphere in worship.¹⁰ However, the point Paul is still making is that woman is subordinate to man and that the veil should be worn as a symbol of man’s “authority” over her.

Dia tous angelous — More common interpretation of this phrase is that angels were the upholders of the divine order and that a woman worshipping without a veil would show disrespect for this order and would be offensive, therefore, to the angels. However, given the concern Paul has in this letter for immorality and sexual licence, and his likening the woman who does not wear a veil to a woman of loose character, it is likely that Paul is thinking here of the angels of Gen. 6 who look on the daughters of men and lust after them, a story which was more fully developed in the Book of Enoch (Eth. Enoch. 6 ff; 67-8; 106: 13-14). Paul is also conscious

7. Hering, p. 108.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

9. E. Earle Ellis, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), p. 63.

10. Martin Dibelius, *Paul* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 38, 39.

of the story from the Book of Adam and Eve where Satan comes before Eve as an angel of light in order to seduce her (cf. 2 Cor. 11). In this case the veil expresses that she belongs to her husband and is under his authority and protection.

vv.11, 12. Almost as an afterthought Paul recognizes that all those traditions must also be examined *en Kurio*, “in the Lord”. “Of course, nevertheless”, sounds a note of theological retreat. The male is just as dependent on woman as she is on him in the Lord. This is much more in line with what Paul has previously said in this letter about the equality of the sexes, 7:1-4 and also what he had recently written to the Galatians (3:28). Paul can sense the contradiction he has been expressing but his desire to keep to the social custom in order not to give offense is strong.

v.13. “Judge for yourselves” — Paul appeals to their good sense just as he did before in regard to eating meat offered to idols (10:15). It is not a matter of divine command but a matter of what is appropriate under the circumstances. *Autois* indicates that he is addressing the whole congregation and not just the women.

vv.14, 15. Paul now appeals to nature (*phusis*) itself, even though this argument really deals with custom too. He is arguing that nature has endowed women with an abundance of hair to show its desire that she should be covered. But then why should she need a veil if nature has already supplied her with a covering? It is not a very strong argument. Paul seems to be grasping at hairs here! Also, how does “nature” teach that man is to have short hair? Certainly, custom at that time may have regarded long hair on men as effeminate. We should have all the traditional paintings of Jesus changed.

V.16. Paul closes the matter with a final statement of law: This is what the practice is and we do not recognize any other custom. This is his ruling. He does not want to discuss it any more. His real concern behind it all is his fear that the Corinthians are moving beyond the freedom of the Gospel into licence, exercising no controls. This fear is only heightened by their unnatural competition with each other over charismatic gifts. In such a situation the pronouncement of the law is appropriate.

1 COR. 11: 2-16 AS THE WORD OF GOD TO US

Paul has shown himself as very human in this section using every kind of argument he can muster to say: This is the custom. Women should show their subordination to men by wearing the veil. To do otherwise may only bring dishonour to the church and cause offense to those who do not understand.

So God’s message to us in this passage is to use our freedom in the gospel in a responsible way. Freedom in the gospel can never be selfish, but always seeks the good of others. This section as well as the rest of the exhortations in this letter lead on quite logically to 1 Cor. 13. We are dealing here with responding to custom in a responsible way. It is not a matter of a fundamental theology.

Once again, we must look at this passage in its general as well as its immediate context. It is part of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. Many of them were not impressed by his exhortations in this letter or later in person. This caused him to

send a more severe letter to them upon receipt of which they repented and dealt with the immoral situation in the congregation. Thus, Paul can feel free to proclaim the gospel to them again in all its sweetness and joy in his fourth letter (2 Cor. 1-9). I do not think it is pure coincidence that Paul again speaks about a veil in that fourth letter (2 Cor. 3:7-18). In this case it is the veil put over Moses' face because the minds of the Israelites were hardened. Only through Christ is that veil taken away (vv. 15, 16). Then comes the punchline (vv. 17-18): "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we *all*, with unveiled face, mirroring the glory of the Lord (*ten doxan kuriou*) are being changed into his image (*eikion*) from one degree of glory to another (*apo doxes eis doxan*). This is from the Lord, the Spirit."

What about those human institutions — customs, traditions with their levels of status? Paul's gospel answer is found in 2 Cor. 5:16,17: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."