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Lifting the Veil: A Social-Science Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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Lutherans consider the Bible to contain the inspired word of God. We believe that God speaks to us through the medium of this special collection of writings. As such the Bible transcends the limits of time and space. Its message, we believe, is directed not only to one place and time in history, but to all places, times, cultures and societies. The gospel message is meant to be embodied, to be lived out in communities of faith, and in an unbelieving world. But sometimes what we read in the Bible is really difficult to understand. We are left wondering, "What does this have to do with my life, with my community?"

First Corinthians 11:2-16 is a perfect example of a difficult biblical text. It begins with Paul writing, "I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife." Then he goes on to explain how it is disgraceful for men (or husbands) to prophesy and pray with their heads covered, and that it is disgraceful for women (or wives) to prophesy and pray with their heads *uncovered*. What on earth are we to do with a text like this? In the past this text was used to justify the custom of women wearing hats to church, but that doesn't seem to be the case any longer. Is 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 a text that has lost its relevance for our times? It may seem that way, especially since it suggests a hierarchical relationship between women and men (or wives and husbands) which is repugnant to many people today. Yet it is precisely because this text is used in some circles as a proof text for the subordination of women that we dare not ignore it. It is a text whose meaning must be made clear so that it will not be misused.

I would like to show how a social-science interpretation of the text can help us understand better what is at issue in 1

Corinthians 11:2–16. Social-science analysis is a relatively new method of interpretation which seeks to understand the biblical text as a reflection of and a response to the specific and cultural setting in which it was produced. Social-science analysis combines historical information from the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds with insights from sociology and cultural anthropology to illuminate the social context from which the biblical texts emerge and which they seek to address. In other words the biblical message comes to us enmeshed and embedded in a particular historical culture. Before we can hope to grasp how it might be lived out in our time, we need to understand how the gospel message was embodied in the first Christian communities.¹

First Corinthians 11:2–16 was written to Christians living in the city of Corinth around the year A.D. 50. It was written to people who lived several thousand kilometres eastward on a different continent 1950 years ago. We are separated from them by both time and space, and by culture and values. In North America the primary social institution is economics. Success in our society is generally measured quantitatively, in terms of how much money, property or wealth a person has acquired. Academic success is measured in terms of grades and degrees achieved. The primary social institution in the societies of the Mediterranean basin in Paul's day was not economics but kinship: the family. Success in first century Corinth consisted in being related to and knowing the right people. Successful people were those who belonged to and/or had connections with the right families. This depended on adhering to the rules of order by which families were organized and maintained. Those rules were rooted in the pivotal values of honour and shame.

Honour is a socially acknowledged claim to worth. It is linked with respect and prestige, and is associated with having a good name or a good reputation. Honour in Paul's day worked somewhat like a credit rating does today. In our society a good credit rating makes money available, allowing a person to incur debt and acquire goods. One's credit rating points to one's social standing within our society. First century people did not have credit ratings; they had honour. Like our system of credit ratings, honour served as a way of ranking people socially by indicating a person's social standing and rightful

place in the community. In order to make things happen one needed honour, a good name and a good reputation.

In first century Mediterranean societies, the family was the repository of the accumulated honour of one's ancestors. Every member of the family shared in its honour simply by the fact of birth. Honour was acquired through the act of giving gifts and granting favours to other families, thus putting them in one's debt. This was important because very few people in the Greco-Roman world were economically self-sufficient and independent. Families had to rely on each other for mutual support. It was in this business of mutual support that honour was so important. If one were a first century farmer and had a bumper crop of wheat, with whom would one share the proceeds? A family that had an established reputation of honouring their social debts and sharing from their good fortune. Then, if the grasshoppers came and ate one's whole crop next year, one would have someone to turn to for help.

The head of the family, the father, was responsible for publicly maintaining and if possible increasing the family's honour. He publicly symbolized the family's honour, so that his personal reputation and the family's good name were almost synonymous. His wife and children were obliged to show respect, loyalty and obedience to him. They were to behave publicly in such a way as to uphold the father's, and the family's, honour. It was their most valuable asset, assuring the family access to the goods and services needed for its survival. A family's honour was also its most vulnerable point. Every social interaction that took place outside of the immediate family circle was a situation in which honour might be lost or acquired. When giving and receiving gifts, giving and accepting invitations to dinner, arranging marriages, buying and selling, arranging cooperative business ventures, or taking some to court, the first century Mediterranean person had to assess carefully the possible impact on the family's good name.

This brings us to the other side of honour: shame. Shame has two meanings, one negative the other positive. Shame is both the opposite of honour and the basis of honour. On the one hand, for a person to "*be shamed*" signals a loss of honour. "*Shameful*" behaviour damages a person's good name and reputation. On the other hand, for a person to "*have shame*" means that he or she is sensitive to the opinions of

others, is concerned about his or her family's good name and honour. A person of good repute has both honour and shame. A disreputable person is one who not only lacks honour, but one who is "shameless" as well. No one wants to *be* shamed, to lose their honour; everyone, however, needs to *have* shame, to be concerned about their good name in order to have honour.

Although all persons of good repute have both honour and shame, honour and shame are also gender specific. We have already noted the role of the father as the public symbol and representative of a family's honour. In general, the lives of adult men revolved around claiming, gaining and defending their honour (and that of their families) before their peers in the public realm. If a family's honour is embodied by its adult males, its shame (as a positive value) is embodied by its female members. A woman's shame (=honour) can not be acquired, rather it is presupposed and maintained through a rigorous discipline of privacy and reserve, of personal and sexual integrity. What concrete behaviours are involved in establishing a man or woman as a person of good repute varies, however, from community to community, and according to a person's social status. What counts as shameful behaviour for a Galilean fisherman is not necessarily what counts as shameful for a Roman senator. Activities that are honourable when undertaken by a senator's wife might be quite shameful if undertaken by the wife of an innkeeper.²

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Paul associates what individuals wear, or do not wear, on their heads with the question of honour. He asserts that a man (or husband) who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces—dishonours—his head, while a woman (or wife) who prays or prophesies unveiled—dishonours—her head (vv.4-5). Women (or wives) should be veiled if it is disgraceful—shameful or dishonourable—for them to cut their hair or to have their heads shaved (v. 6). The issue here is propriety and honourable conduct during worship, a theme which runs through chapters 11-14 of 1 Corinthians. Throughout this section, Paul is concerned that Christians conduct themselves in such a way that unbelievers and outsiders will not "say that you are out of your mind" (1 Corinthians 14:23). It is, therefore, the church's reputation or honour which is at stake. Paul wants the church to give a good name, to be recognized as a reputable association.

In Paul's world honour makes things happen—it opens doors, attracts benefactors and converts, and keeps the authorities away.

One thing that needs to be emphasized is that throughout the passage Paul assumes that men and women function equally during the community's worship service.³ Both men and women offer up prayers and engage in prophecy, a form of speech that builds up, encourages and consoles the church (1 Corinthians 14:3), and which reproves unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:24). While Paul expects both men and women to have leading roles in the church's worship, he believes that they should dress differently. A bare head is the proper attire for a male worship leader, and demonstrates his respect and honour for Christ. Women who lead worship with bare heads, Paul argues, are not showing respect and honour toward their husbands (men). The point seems to be that even while honouring Christ in worship women should behave in a way that also honours their husbands and/or the other men who have direct authority over them. This means leaving their veils on.⁴

Paul argues that it is proper for women worship leaders to wear veils because man is the *eikon kai doxa* of God, but woman is the *doxa* of man (1 Corinthians 11:7). Although the word *doxa* is sometimes mistakenly interpreted as "reflection" (possibly to make Paul's words cohere with Genesis 1:26–27), it usually means "brightness, splendor, radiance" or "fame, renown, honour".⁵ Given the centrality of honour in the previous verses, I suspect that is the meaning which is relevant here. When Paul says man is the *doxa* or honour of God, but woman is the *doxa* or honour of man, he is reflecting the notion that while a man publicly embodies the honour of his family, a woman personifies its shame. A man's bare head signifies that he is a public person engaged in the pursuit of a good name to the honour and glory of his Creator.

In the gender divided world of honour and shame, however, a woman cannot acquire honour. Instead she embodies the positive value of shame, a quality which can only be guarded and preserved against loss. Shame is also the basis of honour, and it is through the strict maintenance of her sexual purity and personal integrity that a woman contributes to her family's honour.⁶ The veil is a symbol of a woman's shame,⁷ worn

in public to mark her off as a private person intent on guarding her purity, and so maintaining the honour of her husband or her father. This is after all a proper female role because woman was created from and for man (1 Corinthians 11:8–9). The veil is also a symbol of the “authority”, of the respect and status, accorded to women who maintain their purity and integrity (1 Corinthians 11:10). An unveiled woman invites unwanted attentions not only from men but from supernatural beings as well (1 Corinthians 11:10).⁸ Even in the Lord, Paul asserts, woman and man are not independent of one another (1 Corinthians 11:11–12). In other words, even when leading prayer and prophesying in the church women must do so in a way that preserves the honour of their men.

Having, thus, insisted on the propriety of veils, given the role of woman in the maintenance of male honour, Paul goes on to assert that it is natural for women to be veiled. While long hair degrades a man, a woman’s long hair is her *doxa*. In this instance the tendency of translators is to opt for words such as “pride” (RSV) or “glory” (NRSV), insinuating that we are really dealing here with a question of personal vanity. Such treatments do not help to clarify the meaning of the passage. Once again we are dealing with the issue of honour. A woman’s long hair is her “honour” because it was given to her as a covering.⁹ In other words a woman can only maintain her “honour” by being covered up. Why? Because female honour consists in shame, in rigidly preserving and guarding a woman’s sexual purity and personal integrity. Paul does not seem to consider that if nature has provided woman with such a natural covering, perhaps she does not need an artificial one. Nor does Paul consider that if a man did not cut his hair, it would grow long too. What would that imply? Paul simply concludes by saying that if anyone continues to be contentious in spite of his arguments, they are to be reminded that the wearing of veils is customary in all the churches of God (1 Corinthians 11:16).

A social-science reading of the text shows that the question of wearing of veils is bound up with the issue of honour. Paul was concerned that the church be recognized as a reputable association, a gathering of honourable men and women. He did not want outsiders and unbelievers to think that female worship leaders were “shameless” women. Paul argued that wearing veils was proper, natural and customary for women. His

advice was intended to enhance the reputation of the fledgling Corinthian church. Unfortunately, we have only a record of Paul's response to this issue. How did these women who dared to appear in the church bare headed justify their actions? We will never hear their side of the story.¹⁰

All we can do is focus on how to use this text constructively to build up the body of Christ today. To do so we must begin by insisting that the embodiment of the biblical message is not about the wholesale importation of 1st century Mediterranean values into 20th century North American society. We must recognize and respect the historical and cultural differences that separate us from the first Christians. We do not live in a kinship oriented society in which honour and shame are the dominant values. Women in our society once they reach adulthood are not wards of men, but are recognized as independent, autonomous persons both legally and socially. Hence the personal integrity of a woman is not directly related to the reputation of the man who has guardianship of her. Women in our society are not restricted to domestic roles and functions, but can move back and forth between the public world of work and the private world of the home. When we recognize these important cultural and social differences we can see that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is not about wearing hats to church or about proving that women are intended to be subordinate to men. The question that is raised in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 (and through to chapter 14) is: What are men and women doing in the church that maintains, enhances, and/or threatens the honour, the good name and reputation, of the church? The questions for us to ponder are: What are the signs and symbols of personal integrity in our society for women and for men? How is the personal integrity of church members and/or leaders related to the church's public reputation?

Notes

- ¹ For more information on social-science methodology in New Testament studies see John H. Elliot, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Carolyn Osiek, *What are They Saying about the Social Setting of the New Testament?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992); Bengt Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). Each of these works also contains an extensive bibliography.

- 2 Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, revised edition (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 28–62; John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993) 95–104; see also J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) especially Julian Pitt-River's article "Honour and Social Status," pp. 21–74.
- 3 Jouette M. Bassler, "I Corinthians," in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 321–329, esp. 326–327; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1984) 226.
- 4 Schüssler Fiorenza, pp. 227–230, argues that the issue is not one of veils but of hair styles; for a critique of her view see Dennis Ronald MacDonald, "Corinthian Veils and Gnostic Androgynes" in Karen L. King, ed., *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) 276–292, esp. 279–280.
- 5 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* 2nd ed., revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 203–204; Malina, *The New Testament World*, 59.
- 6 Pitt-Rivers, pp. 52–53; the greatest dishonour experienced by males derives from the sexual impurity of their mothers, wives, daughters.
- 7 MacDonald, "Corinthian Veils," 281.
- 8 *Ibid.* 290.
- 9 Bassler, "I Corinthians," 327.
- 10 See in MacDonald's article a summary of the various reasons the Corinthian women might have removed their veils.