

- d. The matter of head covering is at the center of Paul's discussion, but as it pertains to the larger issue of male-female distinction and male headship. That is, Paul saw the problem of "uncovered heads" among the women as a symptom of the church's misunderstanding and misapplication of the principle of male headship as it expresses a fundamental point of distinction between men and women.

Paul also recognized (and acknowledged) that the women in the Corinthian church were seeking to honor and attest the truth that Jesus Christ has, in Himself, formed a new, unified humanity in which there is no male or female (Galatians 3:27-28; cf. Ephesians 2:11ff). *But, ironically, their very efforts to testify in this way to the gospel of new creation insured that their witness fell short of their goal.* The reason is that their assembling with the Church with "uncovered heads" conveyed the wrong message – a message which effectively undermined the gospel – because of how those witnessing their behavior interpreted it. Whether with respect to their fellow believers or outside observers, these women were a stumbling block to the gospel and faith, *not because there is any intrinsic righteousness in a covered head versus an uncovered one, but because of how their appearance was viewed by the culture in which they found themselves.*

- Expressing their equality and freedom in Christ in this way amounted to their refusal to "become all things to all men." And by "scandalizing" those who observed them, these women forfeited the opportunity to testify *in truth* to the gospel reality that there is no male or female in Christ.
- As with the previous issue involving "idol meats," they had unwittingly subjected themselves and their freedom to the condemning conscience of another (ref. again 10:27-30). Instead of pointing others to the truth of the gospel, these women were effectively pressing them away from it.

Corinthian custom frowned on women appearing in public with their heads uncovered (i.e., their hair down), and the result was that the truth of freedom and equality in Christ was maligned where believing women failed to conform to the prevailing cultural norm. Again, there was nothing *intrinsically* wrong in a Christian woman wearing her hair down outside her home, but cultural sensibilities made it wrong because of the offense it caused and the obstacle it erected to the gospel and its fruitfulness. In this, too, Paul pressed the Corinthians with the critical truth that one can be entirely right and yet be very wrong and so come under judgment. *The ministration of love in the cause of the gospel, not correctness or freedom, is the ultimate determination of the rightness of an action.*

Thus Christians must discern the importance of culture and allow it to play its appropriate role in their decisions and conduct. But culture reflects and expresses *nature*: universal patterns of human thought, conviction and practice – patterns which the Church ignores or disregards to its own detriment. One of those universal patterns is the distinction between males and females and the fact that hair is one way in which male-female distinction is affirmed and manifested.

All people recognize – and every culture upholds – fundamental differences between men and women, and Paul understood these differences to be a matter of nature rather than nurture: There are differences between male and female that are inherent rather than inculcated, and Paul’s biblical worldview told him that these differences are by design. God *created* the human creature male and female, designing into them certain inherent distinctions suited to His purpose for them. As with every created thing, so with the creature man in his maleness and femaleness: Form follows function. And precisely because intrinsic male-female distinctions reflect divine design and purpose, they are not to be denied, altered, diminished, or confused. Doing so not only opposes God and His intentions, it opposes the *truth of man* as male and female.

Thus Paul strengthened his case by drawing upon certain truths respecting the created nature and function of male and female, and his argumentation highlights the following particulars:

- 1) Most notable among them is that Paul distinguished between male and female in terms of the *divine image* (11:7). This statement has caused no little controversy among scholars and commentators because it seems to contradict the creation account in the first chapter of Genesis. That account explicitly states that both male and female were created in God’s image (1:26-27); Paul here appears to ascribe the divine image only to males: *Man is the image and glory of God, while woman is the glory of man*. Not only does the creation account include woman in the divine image, it nowhere states that woman is the glory of man. These difficulties have been resolved in various ways, including the proposal that Paul was speaking according to rabbinical tradition rather than the biblical text.

But the best and most reasonable solution has Paul upholding the biblical text rather than deviating from it. That is, Paul wasn’t denying the mutual participation of male and female in the divine image and glory, but was simply highlighting the primacy of Adam in that regard. Eve equally was created in the divine image and likeness and therefore shared in the divine glory, but *derivatively* rather than *directly*: That is, she shared in the divine image as one created out of man, the original image-bearer (cf. again Genesis 1:26-27 with 2:18-23). Interpreted in that way, Paul’s statement shows his adherence to the totality of the creation account.

- 2) This interpretation finds direct support in Paul’s clarifying assertion that man enjoys *primacy of order* over woman (11:8-9). Eve had her origin in Adam, not the other way around. Woman is *ishah* because she derives her existence from *ish* (*ishah* is the feminine form of *ish*). But this order of creation reflected divine purpose: God intended it to reveal to Adam and Eve the nature and role of woman in relation to man: She is *of* man because she was created to be a suitable helpmate to him; she is the *same* creature as man (image-bearer), and yet *distinct* so as to *complete* him.

Uniquely created in the divine image and likeness, there was no other creature suited to Adam. He was the *lord* of God's creatures, and only another creature *just like him* – another “image-lord” – would be a suitable companion. God understood Adam's unique nature and role in His creation, but Adam needed to discern *himself*, and his examination and identification of all the other creatures allowed him to see his uniqueness and therefore what sort of companion would truly be suited to him (ref. again Genesis 2:18-20). A suitable companion would have to share fully in Adam's unique nature, but while also being distinct from him in order to complement and complete him. This is why God chose to create Eve the way He did, forming her from a part of Adam that lay at the very center of – and thereby symbolized – his innermost being.

And so, what may appear at first to be Paul ascribing superiority to man over woman is exactly the opposite. He noted man's primacy of order in creation and the fact that woman shares in the divine image derivatively through him, not to exalt male over female, but to exalt the Creator's purpose in them and so exalt and glorify them both. Women is *of* man and *unto* man, but for that very reason she is *one with him* in all that he is as divine image-bearer and vice-regent over God's creation.

- 3) Woman's suitability to man implies distinction in the context of sameness. In order to complement and complete him, she must be of the same substance as him while also being distinct from him. This complementary relationship, in turn, implies mutual dependence, which is a third component of Paul's argument: “*In the Lord, neither is woman apart from man, nor is man apart from woman*” (11:11). Male-female interdependence has a myriad of components, but Paul cited the one most closely tied to his present discussion: Man may have the primacy of order in creation, but woman enjoys *primacy of geniture*; while woman had her origin in man (“out of the man”), every man since Adam has his personal origin in woman (“through the woman”) (11:12).

It is also noteworthy that Paul qualified this mutual dependence of male and female as being “*in the Lord.*” Here, too, scholars differ in their understanding of the contribution of this phrase. Some interpret it as highlighting the *creation* truth that divine purpose lies behind male-female interdependence: *In the Lord's design*, woman is not apart from man and man is not apart from woman. Others interpret it in terms of the *new creation* as emphasizing the truth that the interdependence of male and female is authentically realized and expressed only “in Christ.” Still others hold that Paul intended both meanings, each in its own appropriate way. This latter view is arguably the best, for it takes into account both the contextual emphasis on creational considerations and Paul's larger concern with male-female relations in the Church as it embodies the new humanity of the new creation in Jesus Christ.

- 4) A fourth particular is Paul's cryptic statement regarding the angels (11:10). If the passage as a whole is difficult, this verse is arguably the most challenging. Paul interjected it without explanation or comment and this has left commentators struggling to situate it within the context and Paul's overall theology in the hope of making sense of it; not surprisingly, interpreters reach different conclusions. The following observations may perhaps prove helpful in seeking to discern Paul's meaning.

The first thing to note is that Paul added this statement as an inference drawn from his creation argument: Man has creational primacy over woman as a matter of divine design; therefore, she is to attest this truth by having "*authority on their head.*" (The contextual focus on a covered head has led various English translations to supply the modifier *sign* or *symbol*, while the KJV adopted a more literal (but less apt) rendering.)

A second observation is that Paul assigned an additional reason for believing women attesting the "authority" on their heads: "*For this reason, the woman ought to have authority on her head, on account of the angels.*" Paul's prepositional phrase, "for this reason," thus looks in two directions: It draws on his preceding argument regarding man's creational primacy and it also looks forward to the prepositional phrase, "because of the angels." Many English versions highlight the former (ref. the NIV), while the NKJ, ASV and NAB highlight the latter.

Finally, Paul's statement must be kept in context. His argument emphasizes natural and cultural sensibilities, but because of their importance in the Church's internal and external life. Paul's (and God's) concern wasn't with fabric on the head or hairstyle, but with women (and men) living out the truth of the gospel of new creation and bearing true testimony to Christ by not giving a wrong impression or otherwise becoming a stumbling block to the faith of others. Christ's saints have a solemn obligation respecting their lives in Him and their witness to Him, and God's angels share that sense of solemnity since they are ministering spirits, appointed by Him to serve the faith and well-being of His people (cf. Acts 5:17-20, 8:25-38, 10:1-8, 12:1-11 with Hebrews 1:1-14).

Taken together, these observations suggest that Paul was speaking from the vantage point that God's angels are present in and concerned about the Church's life and ministry. Whatever the saints' ignorance, foolishness or carelessness regarding the gospel and its ministration, the angels have no such shortcoming; sent by the Lord as servants of His kingdom, *they* are ever faithful to "do all things for the sake of the gospel." So also *they* grasp the critical role of distinctions in the community whose members share equally in Christ's life and Spirit. They are jealous for the *truth* as it is in Jesus, and thus jealous for His saints to manifest a body which is many yet one; a body ordered in the unity and submission of mutual love.