

WOMEN HEAD COVERING: WHAT TRADITION IS REFERRED TO IN 1 COR 11:2-16?

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Abstract

The Bible is not just the product of divine revelation; it is also the product of the cultures, geography and the epochs in which the divine revelations took place. So at times, through eisegesis, cultural orientations which shaped many biblical teachings are understood as divine revelation and are therefore taken as divine norm which all Christians are to follow hook, line and sinker without questioning them. However, biblical exegesis has helped to enlighten and enliven many biblical passages and events and so newer responses to biblical passages have arisen. Should Christians therefore adopt and adapt 1 Cor 11:2-16 as a common Christian practice even when other cultural climes do not have the same cultural orientations as the Corinthians? This article deliberately runs away from eisegesis and adopts simple linguistic and cultural explication of the text to show that it is not necessary for women to cover their heads at Christian liturgical or worship assembly.

Introduction

Paul is one of the most remarkable figures in the New Testament after our Lord Jesus. He is the most widely travelled of all New Testament preachers, distinguishing himself in the many different pastoral matters he fearlessly and courageously dealt with. In dealing with those matters he handled them within the context of contemporary socio-cultural orientations, which later influenced and shaped Christian behaviours and traditions for centuries.

With the arrival of biblical exegesis especially through the historico- critical method of biblical interpretation, the Pauline grounds on which most Christian behaviours and practices had existed have been challenged, simply because exegesis has enabled a better understanding of the grounds on which Paul made some of his earth breaking teachings. In the bid to contextualize these better understandings, new interpretations of the traditions behind Paul's teachings have arisen.

1 Cor 11:2-16 ranks among the most controversial of all Pauline teachings. Hairs have been split, candles and lamps have been burnt, scholarly debates have arisen and so much ink has been poured on paper to resolve the difficulty that contemporary generations face in accepting the teaching of Paul in this passage, especially as it relates to feminist movements. This is simply borne out of the fact that for centuries this teaching shaped Christian practices especially in the area of dress code and relational abilities between men and women at various fora and institutions of society, particularly in liturgical or worship assemblages.

Since many nowadays regard the passage as contemporarily irrelevant in the 21st century, this essay intends to examine as much as possible the tradition behind this Pauline teaching and see if it still holds water.

We shall begin by studying some existing interpretations of the text in question. The author in this article shall presuppose that its readers know the text.

Some existing scholarly interpretation of 1 Cor 11:2-16

The text under study is one of the most controversial passages in the whole of first Corinthians, possibly because of the long standing influence it has had on a Christian practice with regards to dress codes and approach to women. No wonder Joson David BeDuhn (1999:295) quoting from other writers on this passage said; "1 Corinthians 11:2-16 has been called 'one of the most obscure passages in Pauline letters' and 'a linguistic labyrinth rivaling Daedalus's and befuddling a host of would-be Theseuses' and has produced a plethora of imaginative interpretations." Most of the interpretations are tailored towards showing the subservient position of women in that early Christian community of Corinth and they imply that there was a social problem that had crept into the community's liturgical way of life, a problem that was not acceptable to some members of the community. Paul's attempt to deal with the problem is the content

of our passage. We shall critically study a few of those interpretations of our text from the many existing ones in order to have a global understanding of what this passage may be all about. Most biblical scholars of our text do their study of it by breaking it into subdivisions and that is the methodology we shall follow.

The exegeses on the text

The Jan Lambrecht (1998:1694-1695), making a rhetorical interpretation of this passage, whose main argument is intended at showing Christian behaviour during public worship including loud prayer and prophecy (verses 4-5), anchors the position of this article which is on verses 2 and 16 which refer to tradition and customs, respectively. In his exegesis, he divides the passage into three subdivisions with three distinct arguments: verses 3-6 talk on "what the given order of authority implies"; verses 7-12 talk on "what creation involves" and verses 13-15 talk on "what nature teaches". These subdivisions are essential because they help to sharpen the position of this article which holds that the entire argument in 1 Cor 11:2-16 is deliberately meant to put women in a subordinate position, in order to create the grounds to argue for veiling in the Christian community.

The essential word in verses 3-6 is 'head'. Lambrecht (1998:1694) opines that there is a play on the word since it is employed in a physical and metaphorical sense: head (of a body) and source of authority, which in verse 3 a man exercises over a woman. This conception gave birth to the ascending line of woman, man, Christ and God. He concludes that for Paul, it is the order that goes back to creation. Two symmetrical sentences follow in verses 4-5a and they talk about men and women, demanding that women cover their heads and men uncover theirs during prayer or prophecy, and in both cases refusal to comply can lead to disgrace. Paul's basic point is clear: men and women have distinct appearances appropriate to them in the setting of religious practice. To violate these norms is to bring disgrace to the person above one in the hierarchical scale of 'headship' (Joson David BeDuhn, 1999:299). Verses 5b-6 show the problem at Corinth: women are not wearing a veil. Joson David BeDuhn (1999:299) understands the problem when he said that Paul wants women who generally go about unveiled to follow a different decorum in the Christian assembly or else he does not agree with a cultic practice that undermines the established social norm of veiling.

But the exact significance of shaving a woman's head, as taught by Paul in verses 5-6, has been the subject of considerable debate. Its connection here to shaming or breaking with the authority of the man suggests some disavowal of the husband, either as an adulteress or as a widow. It is reasonable to presume that a widow, in shaving her head, publicly displays the termination of her married state, and so by analogy a woman who unveils is declaring her marriage null and void. Commenting further, BeDuhn's (1999) opines that Paul's statements in verse 5-6 move from the specifics of the ritual situation to general truths in his argument. If that is so, Paul cannot be speaking of all women in these verses, since young, unmarried girls were allowed to go unveiled in the ethnic communities of the Mediterranean. He certainly does not intend to command these maidens to be shaved; his concern is solely with the propriety of married women. In v. 6, Paul may mean that it is "unseemly" for a married woman to be shaved because such an act infringes upon the husband's authority.

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor (2005:808, no.53) takes a different interpretation of 'head'. He said its Greek equivalent, *kephale*, doesn't connote authority or superiority but "source" as the appropriate meaning and so, he partially translates the verse as the source of every person's new being is Christ. The slight variation in interpretation of 'head' between Lambrecht (1998), Joson David BeDuhn (1999) and O'Connor (2005) is fascinating. It means there is no dogmatic interpretation to the text and various stands on the text could be taken. No wonder, Joson David BeDuhn (1999:298) says

Paul taking advantage of the semantic range the word 'head' provides...employs a hierarchical paradigm that would appear to be part of "tradition" he hopes the Corinthians maintain"... a stock piece of Christian tradition which puts "man", "Christ" and "God" in a hierarchy and inserts into that tradition a piece of cultural wisdom - possibly deriving from Gen. 2, perhaps a mundane social maxim - about the subordination of woman (wife) to a man (husband).

BeDuhn's (1999:298) view is interesting, because one could argue therefore that Paul was forcing his views into the situation in order to gain the support of some members of the Corinthian Church, particularly the men as it happens in most patriarchal societies even today. It means this teaching is not a piece of divine revelation, but the product of a common sense. This mentality shapes the entire flow of Paul's argument in the passage as we shall see below.

On the ban against woman speaking or praying aloud in public at worship times, O'Connor (2005) and Matthew Henry (1991) understand it as that women in leadership positions or moved by the inspiration of the Spirit could speak or pray but with their heads veiled. It is funny that it can be permissible for women to speak in worship assemblage considering that in 1 Cor 14:38 Paul completely abhors it. This inconsistency between 1 Cor 11:2-16 and 1 Cor 14:38 leaves much to be desired. Why would it be implicitly permissible for women in leadership positions or moved by the Spirit in 1 Cor 11:2-16 to speak, while later on in 1 Cor 14:38, Paul bans them completely from expressing themselves? What this implies is that Paul was looking for an easy way out of his argument.

Having used the Greek understandings of the concept 'head' to call for veiling of the head by women, in verses 7-12 Paul, continuing his teaching, employs a rich foundation of the Christian faith to support and push his argument to conclusion: the creation narrative in Genesis 2. This view is supported by O'Connor (2005:809), BeDuhn (1999:301) and Lambrecht (1998). In fact, BeDuhn (1999:301) in particular says:

In vv 7-9 Paul alludes to the biblical account of creation, and so in some sense to the "order of creation". Paul's views about the appropriate appearance distinctive of men and women in worship are based on a hierarchy of "headship," which in turn rests on created priority that subordinates women in origin ("from"), purpose and status ("for") to men.

There is, however, a great difficulty in understanding verse 10. Scholarly opinions have been divergent especially in trying to reconstruct the Greek sentence and the meanings inherent in the words Paul used in this verse. Some have wondered how it connects with the preceding arguments from verse 3-9. In a hair splitting strategy, BeDuhn (1999:302-303) attempts to solve the problem of verse 10, by saying women must have, that is, exercise authority over their heads. This position is predicated on the Greek word, *exousia*. BeDuhn's (1999) use of *exousia* has raised some pertinent fundamental issues to be gained from a linguistic analysis of *exousia*. The Greek word, *exousia*, when applied to this passage would suggest that women themselves possess power of authority and are not to be under the authority of someone else's. The reason is simply because *exousia* is otherwise unattested in Greek literature with the meaning "a sign of someone else's authority". Even Paul always employs the term elsewhere to mean authority held by the subject: the individual's right and freedom to act, the individuals'

control over objects, persons, or situations, and by extension as a title of individuals who exercise such authority. But throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul's concern on the issue of 'authority' is in the sense of rights or freedom claimed by his readers being voluntarily subordinated to broader community values. Hence, in 1 Corinthians 11:10 Paul reverses the linguistic force of the terminology *exousia* to mean a woman's control over her own head, by which she demonstrates her faithfulness to her husband or her acknowledgment of her status.

There is still a worry at Paul's reversed interpretation of *exousia*. The worry is found in Paul's use of another Greek word, *opheilo*. *Opheilo* as used by Paul is grammatically meant to reinforce the understanding of *exousia* as one's own right and authority, but which Paul in his wisdom explicates as obligation: obligation to perform one's own duty and to act upon one's own responsibility and commitment, in this case to unwittingly accept subordination to men and to express it by veiling. The reversal of the linguistic force of *exousia* by Paul in O'Connor's (2005:809) view is a mistake, because Paul takes for granted the leadership role women play in the community (verse 5) with an authority she enjoys precisely as a woman and so must stress her sex by her hairdo.

Therefore, the Greek words, *exousia* and *opheilo*, from a grammatical point of view, are diametrically opposed to the arguments of Paul in this portion of our text. To contextualise the use of words not in their grammatical nature and function can be very suspicious of a deliberate attempt at satisfying certain preconceived objectives, as a third eye look of this passage would expect.

Apart from the reversed understanding of *exousia* and *opheilo*, used by Paul to call for women's subordination and thus insistence on veiling, he admonished women to cover their heads because of angels. This reason has generated a plethora of interpretations. Some scholars believe Paul made this exhortation because angels constitute the force that threatens the exposed prophetesses and in the understandings of some semitic cultures, the force that threatens women in general. Such an interpretation could lead to a flood gate of questions such as, is it that the angels are attracted to the women? What about the men? Why would the angels not threaten them for not covering their heads? But BeDuhn (1999) thinks otherwise, he says the mention of Angels are on the fact that women must be responsible for their own heads, but not necessarily relevant to the specific ordinance of veiling, which is a particular application of that responsibility. To argue that the angels play the role of a threat is to assert that verse 10 has little or

nothing to do with verses 3-9, that is an additional reason which Paul's readers were to understand solely on the basis of the one word, 'angels'. Good as the view may be, it still leaves questions unanswered.

In verses 11-12, Paul's argument takes a different direction. He places men and women on equal dignity. The shift in Paul's argument in verses 11-12 to placing women on equal dignity seems to nullify his preceding arguments from verses 3-10 that compulsorily require women to veil their heads in public liturgical settings on the grounds of subordination. O'Connor (2005:809) gives the reason for the shift: the fact that woman is the source of man (contrast v 3b) manifests divine intention and therefore nullifies the Jewish interpretation of Gn. 2:21-23, making women's subordination unnecessary. This is striking and it makes nonsense of Paul's preceding argument. In fact, that Paul's argument did not carry so much weight is shown in verse 13, when he appeals to simple logic in a rhetorical ploy, by asking them to judge for themselves. There is a sense in which the whole argument leaves much to be pondered upon. Prior to verse 13, Paul had spoken with a certain measure of authority basing it on such matters as tradition, authority, the Genesis account and the angels. With these unconvincing postures worn by the passage, should it then be used as a universal Christian norm applicable to non-Corinthian Christian communities? Was the tradition of veiling fully practiced in the Church at Corinth even after Paul's teaching? Verse 13 suggests otherwise.

Many exegetes see in verse 16 a Paul who is very unsure of the success of his argument. Contrary to most of them, BeDuhn (1999:315) does not regard his tone as peevish or tyrannical. Rather, he regards this verse as irenic and suggestive of the tone taken by the Corinthians in their inquiry to Paul. Note the elusive reference of Paul's "such a custom" in the verse. This uncertainty has its roots in verse 13, where Paul offered to the Corinthians the right to judge for themselves whether a woman praying with her hair uncovered is "suitable" in the light of Paul's argument. Paul's approach scarcely sounds like polemic against an aggressively asserted Corinthian innovation. Rather 1 Cor 11:2-16, appears to be a response to a sincere question the Corinthians have concerning gender distinctions in ritual decorum.

Our study of the scholarly views on the passage has not given us any strong reason to insist that women should veil their heads at liturgical set ups. Instead, we seem to have more reason to argue that women should be given the liberty to leave their

heads unveiled especially when traditional customs of particular Christian communities other than Corinthian's do not require such dress codes. In addition, Paul's insistence on men and women maintaining traditional distinctions in the assembly negates one of his cardinal teachings: a teaching that does not allow human boundaries and distinctions, but upholds equality in Christ who died for all.

Paul, in his argument, made an appeal to traditions in verse 2 in the hope of making it convincing. What is that tradition?

The problem: What tradition lies behind Paul's teaching?

The linguistic and semantic scholarly studies we made of our passage show inconclusiveness and leave more questions than direct answers. For instance, BeDuhn's (1999) linguistic analysis of certain thoughts in the passage, especially on the use of the Greek word *exousia*, does not solve many problems. Instead it leaves thinking minds to question why Paul would force a reversal application of the Greek term in his teaching. One is attempted to ask, are scholars like BeDuhn (1999) not reading into the text? In addition, O'Connor's (2005:808-9) historico-narrative analysis of the passage does not explicitly tell us why Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 11:2-16 should be the basis of a universal Christian dress code practiced by all Christians of the world's cultures. On the contrary, O'Connor (2005:808-9) seems to imply that Paul's teaching in our passage should not be the basis for the enforcement of a universal and single standard of Christian dress code in the worship set-up. If linguistic and semantic analyses do not completely give grounds for the insistence that women of all cultures should veil their heads, could the traditions mentioned in verse 2 help? So what tradition did Paul raise to found his argument of women's subordination and thus the demand for the veiling of the head? Was it Corinthian or Jewish or Genesis' or a general one?

If the tradition is Jewish, then both men and women would cover their heads at worship gatherings and most importantly, women would not share much common collegiality at worship as it seems the Corinthian women shared, even though to some extent they were not allowed to preach, teach or exercise authority as implied and stated in 1 Tim 2:11-12 and 1 Cor 14:34-35 respectively (David M Scholer, 2003:98). It means that the content of Paul's teaching in our passage was

not following Jewish traditions. It couldn't have been the Genesis' tradition, because Paul used the Genesis account to buttress his point on the subordination of women and therefore to call for the enforcement of the tradition of veiling. We are left therefore with the Corinthian or Mediterranean traditions as the traditions Paul was referring to in verse 2. However, did Paul really mean tradition in the sense that it is socio-anthropologically understood?

The Greek word Paul used for tradition in this passage in the New Testament Greek text is *paradoseis*. Grammatically, it is a feminine plural noun in the accusative case, which technically refers to a number of traditions, whether Corinthian only and/or other Mediterranean traditions inclusive. In the singular number the word is *paradosis*. *Paradosis* is found thirteen times in the New Testament: eight times in Mark 7:3-13 and elsewhere only in the Pauline corpus. W. Popkes (1994:21) says "the noun consistently means traditional regulations, that which is handed down from generation to generation with an authoritative demand for compliance and is received accordingly...the regulations are learned, passed on, received, obeyed, grasped". Drawing out the characteristics of such traditions, Joseph Salihu (2011:23) says that they are highly authoritative and cannot be questioned, existing over and above the individual. They are not subject to revision or modification at the discretion or benefit of the individual. The destiny of the individual is shaped by the voices of authority residing in the tradition.

This socio-anthropological sense is for sure what Paul meant in verse 2 of 1 Cor 11:2-16, a sense which shaped his entire teaching in the passage. He sought to contextualize traditional regulations that had been handed down through the generations into a Christian setting in the hope that it would be learnt, grasped, received, obeyed and passed on as a practice. By doing so, he was carrying the heritage from the past into the present (Douglas A. Knight, 1992:634). Now, two big questions come to mind. Should the tradition go on without questions? Is the tradition here a divine revelation?

Some of those who engage in various forms of dialogue, especially interreligious dialogue, propose detraditionalization as a pre-requisite ground for a fruitful dialogue. That is not what is proposed here. Paul Heelas (1999:2) describes detraditionalization as a shift of authority: from 'without' to 'within', entailing the decline of the belief in a pre-given or natural order of things and at the same time enabling individual subjects to exercise authority in the face of the disorder and

contingency which is thereby generated. This presents a notion where 'voice' is displaced from established sources, coming to rest with the self. My argument in this article does not call for the adoption and adaption of the extremes views of detraditionalization, where for instance, 'voice' does not follow established sources, but I instead call for a revisit of the past traditional notions and structures, with the view to making them contemporarily relevant. In this case, should the Corinthian or Mediterranean traditions Paul talked about in 1 Cor 11:2 be binding on all other cultures and traditions? Obviously not, because the tradition for instance is not originally African as it was original to the Corinthians or Mediterraneans. Therefore, that this tradition is mentioned in the Bible does not make it a biblical culture or the product of divine revelation. The fact of the matter is that Paul was dealing with a pastoral problem whose effects could be disastrous for the Corinthian Church and so he appeals to conventional traditions to settle the problem. In doing so, he lifted from Genesis 2 to support his point.

There are communities in the world that are not as patrilineal as the Corinthian or Mediterranean traditions on which Paul hinges his teaching. What do you do to Christians of such communities? Give them the liberty to voice themselves like detraditionalization suggests? Should they be allowed to express their Christian practices especially in and through their local dress codes? The context should be the judge of what should be the practice. Had Paul's teaching been divine revelation, then it would have been binding on all Christians to adopt the dress code suggested in our passage. The fact is Paul was using his common sense under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to solve a dangerous problematic situation that was brewing and he did it proficiently, even though from his statement in verse 13, scholarly opinions are that it was not all who were listening to him who were convinced by his arguments. Against this backdrop, what should Christian action on this passage be?

1 Cor 11:2-16 and Action

An annoying behaviour is often seen among Christian women, especially in Nigeria, whenever there is a call to prayer and/or when Christians gather to pray. Using the content of Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 11:2-16, those of them who have no covering on their heads run helter-skelter looking for any kind of object to cover their hair before the commencement of prayer. The objects they use include

papers, books, handkerchiefs and in fact anything. In an extreme case, I have seen a woman use a plate to cover her head before the commencement of prayer. Such behaviour is not necessary. Biblical exegesis has exposed us to a better understanding of the Bible and so new trends, based on the better understanding of our text, are arising every day.

One of such new trends is that women in Nigeria, like most other parts of the world, are beginning to walk into Churches with their heads uncovered. To do so is not to commit any sin at all, because it has not been totally Nigerian that women should cover their heads at a worship set up or before their elders. What had been the case was that women should keep an appreciable hairdo. The pre-Christian or pre-Western Nigerian traditions, especially in the South, did not ask women to cover their heads at the moment of traditional worship or pious acts, because it was not considered necessary. Since most Nigerian traditional traits have been contextualized into Christian beliefs and practices, why can't this aspect be looked at from an African or a purely Nigerian perspective? The basis for such contextualization should therefore be on the kernel of the gospel message gained from divine revelation and not from the application of common sense to solve a pastoral problem. It is the belief of this article that such concern should also apply in this case. Moreover, we have learnt from the exegesis of BeDuhn (1999) that Paul's statements in verse 5-6 were not addressed to all women in these verses, since young, unmarried girls were allowed to go unveiled in the ethnic communities of the Mediterranean. We must ask why are the unmarried girls in Nigeria also made to veil their heads?

In Jan Lambrecht's (1998:1694-1695) view modern readers cannot accept that "woman" is not like "man" a direct image of God (see Gn. 1:26-27) nor will they take for granted customs or conventions that are clearly time- conditioned or culture-bound. The questions, however, remain: to what degree does equality between the sexes involve uniformity, and to what degree does sexual difference imply diversification in function and responsibility? These are pertinent matters to be considered in applying 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 on the matter of Christian dress code.

The Catholic Church through the Pastoral Commission of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, makes this significant and ground breaking statement "...but it must be noted that these ordinances, probably inspired by the customs of the period, concern scarcely more than disciplinary practices of minor

importance such as the obligation imposed upon women to wear a veil (scarf) on the head (1Cor 11:2-6); such requirements no longer have a normative value.”

Conclusion

This article is not a call to rebellion. It is a call to proper contextualization to biblical passage. Should a woman or man find themselves in a place of little understanding, they should try to respect the current Christian attitudes there. But should they find themselves in a place where their dress code in Christian assembly would not lead to any scandal, then they can keep their dress code in accordance with the local custom in the area of dress codes. The point of this article is, women can pray and go into a Church ordinarily with unveiled heads, unless the otherwise becomes the necessary.

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