WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

PART 2: TWO DIFFICULT TEXTS

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Contents

Note from the author: I respectfully request that this paper isn't distributed outside Grace Church Truro without my permission.

All quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV).

Introduction

Sometime in the middle of the first century AD, the apostle Paul wrote to the church that he had planted in Corinth to insist on women wearing head coverings. The specific problem facing the Corinthian church clearly isn't one that we face in the West today. Clearly, there are elements of the passage that are purely 'cultural'. Yet, 1 Corinthians 11 also functions as a helpful case study that illuminates the main principle we looked at in the former paper. The head coverings dispute provided Paul with an occasion to set out what's distinctive about a Christian understanding of gender.

Firstly, the passage affirms *the distinctiveness of male and female*. At one point, Paul presents the lovely idea that a woman has a glory all of her own, a particular kind of glory that's different to the glory of the man (v. 15). Earlier on, he suggests that the differences between men and women are not socially prescribed; they're rooted in creation:

> **1 Corinthians 11:8**
> *For man did not come from woman, but woman from man.*

There's a host of questions that we may wish we could ask Paul at this point. What exactly does he understand by a woman's 'glory'? [1] What does the priority of man in creation mean for gender roles today? These are the kinds of questions that don't seem to matter as much for Paul as they may for us. Paul isn't interested in nailing down a theology of gender in the abstract; he writes his letter to deal with immediate practical concerns. But, along the way, he drops in some insights about how we should think about women and men. Sexual differentiation is part of God's creation order. Women and men are created different.

But then Paul does something else. Having raised the issue of male-female distinctiveness, Paul immediately introduces the theme of *interdependence*:

> **1 Corinthians 11:11**
> *Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.*

It's as if Paul is saying, 'Lest I be misunderstood, although there are differences between men and women (because of *creation*), and this distinction should be recognised when you gather to worship (wearing head coverings in accordance with *culture*), this in no way implies a one-sided dependence of one sex on the other. And nor does it imply the inferiority of one sex to the other.'

In other words, Paul's entire argument is predicated on the idea of union-with-distinction. Men and women are designed to work together as equal partners (that's the *union* part), while at the same time having their own distinct contributions to bring (and weaknesses to contend with) (the *distinction* part).

Union-with-distinction

In my first paper, I suggested that everything that the Bible says about men and women is grounded in this idea of union-with-distinction or what (following Andrew Wilson, 2020) I'm calling 'complementarity'. I also introduced the main features of the debate that's going on in the church concerning gender. This debate isn't about the essential equality of women and men: everyone's agreed on that (or ought to be). The debate centres on whether there are certain *roles* that should be restricted to men.

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[1] Any understanding of 1 Corinthians 11:15 needs to be able to connect a woman's long hair (presumably worn loose over her shoulders and/or down her back) with the idea of 'glory.' Perriman suggests that a woman's glory has to do with sexuality and feminine beauty (1998, p. 92). Whatever glory means, a woman's long hair is what sets her apart her as a woman, signifying her distinctive, female splendour.

I explained that there are two main poles of the debate: the egalitarian (or mutualist) view, and the complementarian (or hierarchialist) view. These positions are frequently understood to be at loggerheads, but perhaps a more adequate way of looking at them is to regard them as illuminating different aspects of God's design for men and women. My reading of 1 Corinthians 11 above suggests that both the egalitarian and complementarian positions are on to something:

- *With those who hold to an egalitarian (or mutualist) viewpoint*, I affirm the essential equality of women and men and God's design for women and men to partner with another in marriage and ministry. As I argued in my first paper, ever since Eden, woman has been man's 'companion, complement, counterpart and collaborator' (Williams, 2022, p. 75).

- *With those who hold to a complementarian (or hierarchialist) viewpoint*, I affirm that men and women have been created different. Without falling into the trap of gender stereotyping, women and men have different strengths and are vulnerable to different temptations – which of course is precisely the reason why we need one another.

If this seems like a case of 'having my cake and eating it', then I would say that I'm simply trying to be consistent in my adherence to complementarity. This often does feel like a balancing act. The world frequently swings one way, towards distinction without union, or the other, towards union without distinction. The essence of a biblical theology of gender is that it insists on keeping both together.

This is why I think Paul's inclusion of the little phrase 'in the Lord' in 1 Corinthians 11:11 is significant. Where the world consistently fails to hold distinction and union together, Paul speaks of the new possibilities that are now ours because of Christ. The coming of the Lord Jesus into the world has brought into being a community that recognises what is most deeply *true* about men and women. Yes, men and women are created and different but, at the same time, 'there is a profound interdependence and mutuality present in the male-female relationship' (Schreiner, 1991, p. 173).

A difficult question

In my first paper, I claimed that this vision for male-female complementarity is not only true; it's also beautiful. But Paul's teaching to the Corinthians also highlights something else. Behind the exalted prose about a woman's glory and male-female interdependence sits a difficult question.

I've said that Paul writes to the Corinthians to insist on the women wearing head coverings. In his time and place, that would have been appropriate. It was an important way in which the distinction of men and women was maintained. But what is the equivalent for us today? Surely not head coverings: that wouldn't convey any meaning in our western culture. So, what is it? How is the *distinctiveness* of male and female to be recognised in the Church?

This question that takes us to the heart of this paper and the next. There are believers who maintain that an important way in which the Church recognises the distinctiveness of the sexes is by prohibiting women from preaching or teaching in certain settings. Typically, this argument is made on the basis of Paul's teaching on male 'headship' (which complementarians understand in terms of the particular authority that God has vested in men) and direct injunctions like the one made by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12: 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man.' Men and women are created equal but different, and the practical outworking of that difference is that women shouldn't be permitted to deliver 'authoritative teaching' in a setting where men are present.

There are believers who take a different view. Ten years ago, I wrote a paper to explain our position in Grace Church that women *should* be permitted to teach in whole-congregation settings. Since then, the position of the Grace Church elders hasn't changed, although I think that I can now provide a more robust defence of our position. Hence these papers.

Of course, if having read these papers, you end up taking a different view, then that's fine. Where issues written in ink and pencil are concerned, we should be mature and humble enough to embrace more than one view in the church. In Grace Church, we do not consider where someone lands in this debate to be an essential matter. I'll be returning to this theme in Paper 4.

Three difficult texts

How do we begin to engage biblically with the issue of gender distinctives? The question is an important one. In our thinking about roles for men and women, we don't want to be guided by what our culture tells us; we want to submit to the authority of God's Word. We want to learn to think about this issue *Christianly.*

There are, in fact, three important passages in the New Testament, all of which are found in the writings of Paul. Taken together, they're often held to support the traditionalist or complementarian view that it's inappropriate for women to hold positions of authority in the church, or bring authoritative teaching to the whole congregation:

Text	1 Corinthians 11:3-16	1 Corinthians 14:33-35	1 Timothy 2:11-15
Issues	Presents the idea of male headship. Suggests that male headship is rooted in the doctrine of the trinity and the order of creation of men and women.	Suggests that women shouldn't speak in public meetings.	Specifically prohibits women from bringing authoritative teaching where men are present. Appeals to the order of creation.

I refer to '*the* traditionalist view' but in reality there's no such thing. The fact is that there are many views on these passages held by complementarians. Once again, we're dealing with a spectrum of related viewpoints rather than a single view. But what unites the various complementarian perspectives is the view that some, or all, of these passages require that we recognise certain restrictions on women serving in church life.

The second thing to note up front is that each of these passages present some very real difficulties to the interpreter. These texts are among the most difficult in the New Testament. This is why I'm going to begin, not by jumping into the first of the texts, but with some introductory remarks on how we should read the Bible. This section is important, and I urge you not to skip it. Having thought about matters of interpretation, you may then wish to skim through or skip over sections of this paper, depending on what interests you:

- *Paper 2: Two Difficult Texts*
  In this paper, we'll look in turn at the 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 passages. Where the discussion gets detailed and more technical, this is indicated with a coloured line in the margin. *These marked sections can be skipped without losing the thread of the overall argument.*

- *Paper 3: Who Can Teach?*
  In the next paper, we'll look at 1 Timothy 2 in relation to the question, who can teach? This text is the Big One where thinking about women teaching is concerned. I'll conclude by explaining why, in Grace Church Truro, we don't believe that women should be prohibited from teaching in our Sunday meetings.

Interpreting the Bible

Anyone who's ever got into an argument or a debate with a fellow believer will appreciate that, where forming a Christian viewpoint is concerned, it's not enough to look at 'what the Bible says'. The fact is that a complementarian believer and an egalitarian believer can both read the exact same text and go away with different views on what's being taught about gender roles. It turns out that interpreting the meaning of the Bible is sometimes less straightforward than we might think!

This is why, in this paper and the next, I want to explore our three difficult texts using a framework called the 'three worlds model'.[2] It's an interpretive tool designed to help us get at a text's meaning.

The three worlds model is based on the idea that, whenever we read the Bible, we can think of three worlds colliding:

- Firstly, there's *the world of the text.* These are the particular features of the text itself, such as the particular words that have been chosen, the way the argument has been structured, and so on.

- Then there's *the world behind the text.* This is the historical context in which the text was originally written. Appreciating the world behind the text means knowing something about the way the original audience saw the world (hint: the ancients didn't see the world as we see it today).

- Finally, there's *the world in front of the text.* This is our own cultural and church context. This differs in all kinds of ways from the culture in which the text was written. I've already mentioned one example: a woman wearing a head covering doesn't carry the same meaning in our culture as it carried in New Testament times (and still carries in some other parts of the world today). The world in front of the text also includes us as readers. Each of us 'filters' our understanding of the text through our own experience and assumptions about reality. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's an unavoidable feature of *all* interpretation. Whenever any of us picks up any text, we read it in a way that's particular to us. This can be an important consideration when tackling texts that touch on personal sensitivities on things like gender identity, male and female roles in ministry, women's profile in the church, and so on. Our personal background can influence, often quite strongly, how we handle passages like the ones we'll look at later.[3]

So, there they are. The world of the text, the world behind the text and the world in front of the text. Which of these worlds is the most important? They all are. *A text's meaning is found in the interplay of the three worlds.*

This means that a skilled interpreter of the Bible will keep all three worlds in play. Let me give you two examples which will hopefully show how this works in practice. I'll begin with an example of how the task of biblical interpretation is often done *badly.*

Consider the diagram below (adapted from Hughes, 2020, p. 38). This diagram represents how the Bible is frequently interpreted. Beginning with the world of the text, the interpreter immediately jumps to the

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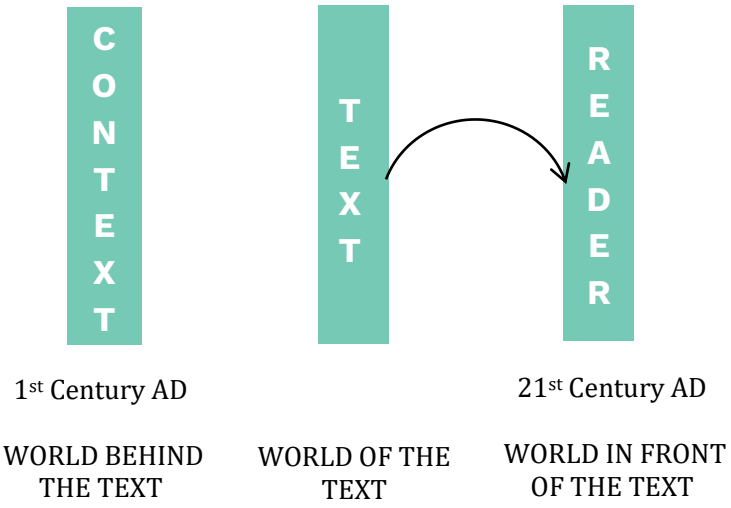
[2] This is associated with the Bible scholar, Terence Fretheim, *The Pentateuch* (1996), cited by Hughes, 2020, p. 38.

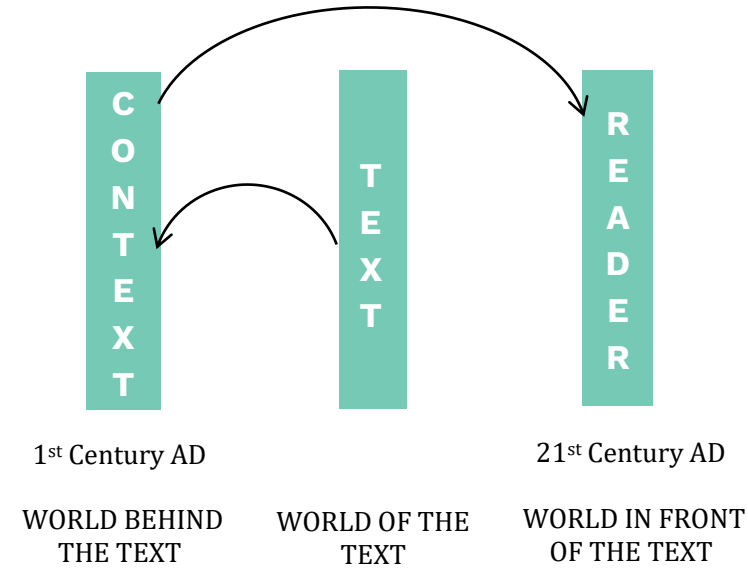
[3] 'The nature of belief is tricky. Rarely do we believe things simply because we took a levelheaded look at all the facts and dispassionately form our beliefs from those facts. Instead, our beliefs are formed in a complex web of emotions, life experiences, stories, fears, and tribal allegiances' (Sprinkle, 2023, p. 19). All of this means that any consideration of the question, 'What is true about gender?' is coloured, inevitably – and, frequently, subconsciously – by the question, '*What do I really want to believe about gender*?' (See Stackhouse, quoted by Williams, 2022, p. 346).

world in front of the text. The attitude here is: 'Here's what the text says! That settles it! If the text says, 'Women are not allowed to speak' (as it states in our 1 Corinthians 14 passage), then that's what the text means. Women shouldn't be permitted to speak in church meetings today.'



The problem with this approach should be obvious. The world behind the text is disregarded. The specific ways in which Paul crafted his message to address a specific situation in first-century Corinth are ignored. It's a significant omission. Most people will appreciate intuitively that what the text meant to the original audience should have at least some bearing on how we understand the text today. Old Testament scholar John Walton is fond of saying that the text was 'written *for* us but not *to* us.'[4] It was written to a specific audience in the ancient world, and the only way in which the text can be considered as having authority *for us* is by first understanding what the author intended to communicate *to them.*

So, a more thoughtful interpreter will take a different approach, represented by the second diagram. Beginning with the world of the text, the interpreter will first consider how the text speaks to the concerns of the original audience, before applying the text to our contemporary world:



[4] He says this in a lot of places. Here's one of my favourites: *Genesis Through Ancient Eyes Pt 1* - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOnsqCVq42A&t=257s

This is a much better approach. Whenever we're seeking to understand the meaning of a passage of Scripture, we shouldn't be too quick to apply the text to our world without first doing the hard work of attempting to understand the world behind the text. We must make the effort to consider what the text would have meant to the original audience, seeking to get at the original author's intended meaning.

This may seem complicated. I admit that sometimes it can be, and the diagram above is greatly simplified![5] But, like anything, the three worlds model becomes more familiar as we begin to use it. I'll be doing just that as we explore each of our three contentious passages below.

Plain meanings of Scripture

There's another issue that some readers may find useful to have addressed before we dive into Paul (others may prefer to skip this section). Talk of the 'interplay of three worlds' and the need to engage with the 'world behind the text' can sound to some as having the air of sophistry about it. I sometimes find myself talking to believers who harbour suspicions about any model that complicates the reading of Scripture. Surely all we need to understand the Bible correctly is an open mind and heart and the help of the Holy Spirit? Why overcomplicate things?

Of particular concern are any attempts to 'interpret' the Bible that circumvents its plain meaning. In a paper written for the Newfrontiers theology forum, Matt Hosier warns against the dangers of performing complicated 'ninja moves' in an attempt to explain away a text's plain meaning (2013, p. 6). Similarly, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, John Piper and Wayne Grudem warn against 'the increasing prevalence … of hermeneutical oddities devised to reinterpret apparently plain meanings of Biblical texts' (1991, p. 111).

I'm broadly sympathetic to these concerns. Anyone who's been involved in pastoral ministry for any length of time will have had occasion to observe how adept people can be at avoiding the plain meaning of Scripture. When our instinctive desires come into conflict with a plain reading of the text, then it's easy to convince ourselves that the Bible doesn't *really* mean what it appears to say.

None of us is immune from this tendency for self-deception. But there's a problem. It's all very well asserting that we should take the plain meaning of the text, but what do we do when the 'plain meaning' is precisely the point at issue? What do we do if the meaning of a text *isn't* plain? And how should we respond when one person's 'plain meaning' differs from another's? Whose 'plain meaning' should we take?

The fact is that identifying the plain meaning of Scripture isn't always as straightforward as we would like. The reason for this is that there's a large temporal and cultural distance between our own context and the context of the original audience for whom the biblical texts were written. An interpretation that may seem 'obvious' to us may never occurred to them. Conversely, things that would have been readily comprehensible to them[6] may not always be so plain and obvious to us. Any interpreter has to reckon with the fact that the Bible wasn't written primarily to address *our* contemporary situation and concerns.

This isn't to deny the Bible's applicability to our lives and situations today. Remember John Walton's dictum: the Bible was written to them *and* for us. That is why, in the discussion that follows, I do my best to draw out how each of our three texts might have been understood by the original audience as well as identifying the timeless principles which I think are still applicable today. Both aspects matter. We need

[5] We should really imagine arrows moving in all different directions. For example, both the world in front of the text and the world behind the text influence what a reader sees in the text. There are plenty of books out there dealing with the complexity of the interplay of the three worlds. But analysing those dynamics isn't my main purpose here.

[6] Or not. Here's Peter's comment on Paul's writings in 2 Peter 3:16: 'His letters contain some things that are hard to understand…' Is it any wonder that we continue to struggle with some of Paul's writings today?

to do the hard work of attempting to understand how the text addresses the concerns of the original audience. At the same time, I don't believe that any of the texts that we'll be looking at are only relevant to the original audience.[7] They convey God's Word to us, too.

So, the first problem with identifying a text's 'plain meaning' is that what was plain to the original audience may not be plain to us. The second problem is that two modern-day interpreters may end up with quite different notions of the plain meaning of a text. This is because none of us ever reads the Bible in a vacuum. We bring a whole set of presuppositions to our reading of a text that are the products of our culture, experience and tradition. This is what's meant by the 'world in front of the text', and it inevitably colours our understanding of a text's meaning.

This issue is especially relevant when there's a significant cultural shift. For centuries, most of Paul's interpreters read his letters in cultural contexts that had been shaped by patriarchal assumptions. Given this cultural backdrop, it's little surprise that most interpreters understood Paul to be speaking 'plainly' about male authority and female submission. But now that many of the assumptions held by previous generations are being challenged, it seems equally 'plain' to many of Paul's modern-day interpreters that the traditionalists have been getting Paul all wrong. Paul isn't saying what previous generations of scholars had assumed he *must* have been saying.

The extent to which our understanding of Paul is influenced by culture is a knotty one to unpick wherever we place ourselves on the complementarian-egalitarian spectrum. For years, I was taught that novel interpretations of Paul (in church-historical terms) are suspicious because they're influenced more by culture than by what's found in the text. I still think this warning carries weight. It's why I think the burden of proof always rests with those who advocate a reading of Paul that marks a departure from traditional church teaching.

However, the traditionalists also have a problem. They can be blind to the extent to which their own interpretations of Paul are *also* influenced by culture. In this case, the cultural assumptions don't come from the third decade of the 21st century, but further back, when the whole of western society was still governed by the principles of male authority and female submission. In light of the fact that none of us can *ever* escape the influence of culture, those who hold to traditional church teaching on gender roles need to be just as clear that they're permitting the texts to address us on their own terms, rather than reading our meanings into the texts.

Awareness of our fallibility

To their credit, John Piper and Wayne Grudem tackle this issue head on. See what they write in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, the book that defined complementarian belief for a generation:

> *Question 42: How do you know that your interpretation of Scripture is not more influenced by your background and culture than by what the authors of Scripture actually intended?*
>
> Answer: We are keenly aware of this fallibility. We feel the forces of culture, tradition, and personal inclination, as well as the deceitful darts of the devil. We have personal predispositions, and have no doubt been influenced by all the genetic and environmental constraints of our past and present. The history of exegesis does not encourage us that we will have the final word on this issue, and we hope we are not above correction. …
>
> Nonetheless, our confidence in the convictions we hold is based on five facts: (1) We regularly search our motives and seek to empty ourselves of all that would tarnish true perception of

[7] John Stott points out that 'the danger of declaring any passage of Scripture to have only local (not universal), and only transient (not perpetual) validity is that it opens the door to a wholesale rejection of apostolic teaching, since virtually the whole of the New Testament was addressed to specific situations' (1996, p. 77).

> reality. (2) We pray that God would give us humility, teachability, wisdom, insight, fairness, and honesty. (3) We make every effort to … [use] the best methods of study available to get as close as possible to the intentions of the biblical writers. (4) We test our conclusions in the real by the history of exegesis to reveal any chronological snobbery of cultural myopia. (5) We test our conclusions in the real world of contemporary ministry and look for resonance from mature and godly people (1991, pp. 105-6).

To my mind, this is one of the most important sections of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.* While I don't agree with all of their conclusions, I think Piper and Grudem perfectly articulate the attitude that should characterise every careful interpreter of Paul.[8] Sometimes Paul's intended meaning is immediately clear, at other times it's less so, but we always need to be guided by the best scholarship and a readiness to recognise the ways in which the presuppositions that we bring *to* a text (the world in front of the text) can influence the meaning we take *from* a text (the world of the text itself).

The discussion that follows, then, is my best stab at making sense of what our three contentious passages mean for the Church today. In the spirit of John Piper and Wayne Grudem, I don't think for one moment that what follows will be the final word on the issue. Space and time don't permit me to engage with all the difficulties raised by each passage. What I'll do is survey the main issues as I see them by applying the three worlds model to each text in turn:

- *The world behind the text:* I'll begin by setting out what we know (or think we know) about the cultural backdrop of the passage. It's only by understanding what the text might have meant to the original audience that we can get close to appreciating Paul's intended meaning.

- *The world of the text:* I'll continue by looking at the detail of the passage. My particular interest will be in the following questions: (i) what if anything does the text say about male authority and female submission? (ii) what's the evidence in the text that there's a prohibition here that's binding for us today? Reference to 'the text' in how I've framed both questions is important. We may think that a passage says all kinds of things, but if we can't justify our views with reference to what we find in the text, then we find ourselves on shaky ground. [At times, the discussion in this section may feel like it's getting quite technical. Readers who don't have an interest in the finer details of exegesis may prefer to skip this section and go straight to the next one.]

- *The world in front of the text:* Here my interest is in how the text applies to our contemporary situation. Given that the text was written *for us*, what are the lessons for current church practice?

[8] In the same vein, Andrew Perriman writes: '[M]eaning is not a pure property of the text alone, but arises out of the interaction between the text on the one hand and the presuppositions and circumstances of the reader on the other. The world has changed considerably in the last two thousand years and we cannot naïvely assume that Paul would address superficially similar situations in exactly the same way. … It is very difficult to approach a topic like this with complete objectivity, and ideological bias very easily leads to the construction of spurious arguments. It is incumbent on every interpreter of Scripture both to pursue exegetical integrity and to subject his or her own presuppositions to critical appraisal' (1998, pp. 11-12).

1 Corinthians 11:3-16

*[3]But I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man [*or: *the head of the wife is her husband], and the head of Christ is God. [4]Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. [5]But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head – it is the same as having her head shaved. [6]For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.*

[7]A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. [8]For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; [9]neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. [10]It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. [11]Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. [12]For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

[13] Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? [14]Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, [15]but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. [16]If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God.

Overview of concerns

	1 Corinthians 11:3-16
What's being prohibited?	Women praying or prophesying in church meetings without having their heads covered
What does the text say about male authority and female submission?	Direct reference to male headship
What are the grounds for saying that there's a timeless principle here?	Reference to the trinity and to the order of creation

The world behind the text

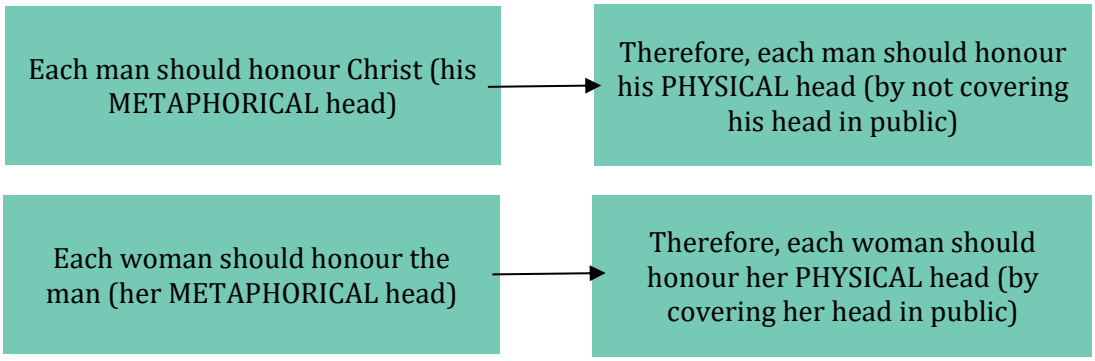
Few passages in the New Testament make the point more forcibly that if we're going to read the Bible correctly, then we need to develop an appreciation of the world behind the text. No one can read this passage without being struck by its strangeness. It's clear that Paul is addressing a first century problem in a first century way, using language and ideas that we can presume would have made sense to his original audience, but which are extremely difficult for us to access today.[9]

[9] Thomas Schreiner identifies 1 Corinthians 11 as 'one of the most difficult … passages in the Bible (1991, p. 158). Gordon Fee writes that the passage is 'full of notorious exegetical difficulties', notably, (i) 'the "logic" of the argument as a whole'; (ii) 'our uncertainty about the meaning of some absolutely crucial terms'; (iii) 'our uncertainty about [the] prevailing customs' of the day (1987, p. 492). This is why Richard Hays presses the 'principle of hermeneutical honesty: we should never pretend to understand more than we do' (1997, p. 190). At the risk of labouring the point, Preston Sprinkle advises: '[I]f you ever come across someone who's super confident that they know how to solve all the exegetical quandaries in this passage, I'd recommend running the other way, since they probably know way less about the passage than they think they do' (2024a).

The problem in Corinth appears to be twofold: when some of the women in Corinth attended church gatherings, they were exposing their long hair for all to see, and some of the men in the church may have been growing their hair long. These things may be far removed from our concerns, but in their culture these practices would have been regarded as shameful. In particular, for a woman to wear her hair loose outside the home might have been read as a sign of her sexual availability. David Instone-Brewer suggests that the equivalent for our context may be a woman turning up to church wearing a bikini or less (2003, p. 30). While the situations aren't exactly equivalent, I think this gives us some insight into how understandings of social decorum, decency and female sexuality are all at play in this difficult passage.

The world of the text

When we turn to consider the world of the text itself, a key issue in this passage is the issue of 'headship'. The word 'head' (Greek, *kephalē*) appears frequently in the text (14 times in total). The first key to unlocking the meaning of the text is the realisation that Paul uses 'head' in two different senses: in both a metaphorical and a literal sense. Conceptually, the connection between the two goes like this:



Our particular interest is in what this argument about head coverings[10] tells us about the timeless relationship between men and women, and what (if anything) it has to say about women contributing to public meetings of the church today.

The reader should understand that I proceed with a significant degree of trepidation. The literature on this text is vast, and the issues exceedingly complex, so I can only offer these reflections tentatively. There's a substantial amount of working in pencil in amongst the ink.[11]

i) What does the text say about male authority and female submission?

In Paper 1, I sketched out the main features of debate on the meaning of the Greek term *kephalē* which is translated 'head'. We saw that there are three different ways in which Paul's use of 'head' might be understood when used in connection with how men and women relate. Here's a reminder:

[10] Some scholars have wondered whether head coverings are really in view in this passage. I take the view that they probably are. See discussion in Sprinkle, 2024c & d.

[11] Right at the outset, it's worth saying that I'm aware that in recent years the British theologian Lucy Peppiatt has proposed a reading of 1 Corinthians that purports to iron out the exegetical difficulties. Peppiatt's take on the passage is extremely interesting and original, but I won't be engaging with it here. For an outline of her views and a thoughtful response, see Sprinkle 2024b.

AUTHORITY VIEW	SOURCE VIEW	PROMINENCE VIEW
Man is subordinate to Christ, Woman is subordinate to man, Christ is subordinate to God.	Man was created through Christ, Woman came from man, Christ came from the Father (in the incarnation).	Man brings glory to Christ, Woman brings glory to man, Christ brings glory to God.

Everything I wrote on this subject in the previous paper is relevant to our discussion here. Much hinges on whether we regard Paul's use of *kephalē* in 1 Corinthians 11 as signifying male *authority*. The debate centres on two verses in particular:

> **Verse 3**
> *But I want you to realise that the **head** of every man is Christ, and the **head** of the woman is man* [or: *her husband*[12]], *and the **head** of Christ is God.*
>
> **Verse 10**
> *It is for this reason that a woman ought to have **authority on her head**, because of the angels.*[13]

For many years in the Newfrontiers network, the general view was that 1 Corinthians 11 is about men having authority. Here's what prominent Newfrontiers teacher, John Hosier, says about verse 3: 'I believe we must see that the word "head", when it is used metaphorically here, is referring to an authority or leader' (2005, pp. 168-69). Hosier justifies this view by pointing to how the relationship between men and women mirrors the relationship between God and Christ. I'll come back to this idea later as how we understand Paul's reference to the trinity has significant implications for our understanding of this passage.

For now, what I want us to realise is that Paul doesn't explicitly say anything about male authority or leadership in connection with verse 3. In fact, he doesn't refer to 'authority' until quite a bit later, in verse 10.

Given that Paul doesn't *tell* us that he's talking about authority in verse 3, how are we to decide which understanding of *kephalē* is the correct one? The best approach is to look at how verse 3 fits with the broader argument of 1 Corinthians 11. But here we hit a snag. The structure of Paul's argument is extremely difficult to discern. This leads to complementarian and egalitarian interpreters having different ideas about what's going on in the argument:

- For a complementarian interpreter, the passage makes most sense when understood to be about male authority and female submission. In *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Schreiner's approach is governed by the idea that a woman's head covering is a sign of submission to male authority. By refusing to wear a head covering, a woman 'communicated rebellion and independence to everyone present in worship' (1991, p. 167).

- An egalitarian interpreter will object that the ideas of 'rebellion' and 'independence' don't appear anywhere in the text. Andrew Perriman asserts that 'the passage … has little or nothing to do with the question of the man's authority over the woman. What damages the headship relationship, whether between the man and woman or between Christ and man, is not disobedience but *dishonour*' (1998, pp. 36-37, emphasis mine).

We'll pick up this discussion on verse 3 again in a bit. For now, let's turn to consider Paul's next mention of *kephalē,* in verse 10. What light does this shed on how best to interpret Paul's use of this term in verse 3?

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[12] It's not clear from the Greek whether Paul is addressing husbands and wives in this passage, or men and women in general. The NIV acknowledges this issue with a footnote at precisely this point in verse 3.
[13] Here, I depart from the NIV by offering a more literal translation. See the discussion below.

1 Corinthians 11:10 – Whose authority?

The first thing to note is that Paul *does* refer to authority in verse 10. Here's what he says (here the Greek construction is translated literally):

> **1 Corinthians 11:10 (literal)**
> *The woman ought to have authority on her head.*

This immediately raises a question: whose authority does Paul have in mind? Is it a man's *authority over a woman*, or a woman's *own authority*? Notice how the NIV, through its inclusion of a footnote, leaves the question open, depending on which understanding of the text we choose:

1 Corinthians 11:10 (NIV main text)	1 Corinthians 11:10 (NIV footnote)
It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head.	*It is for this reason that a woman ought to have a sign of authority on her.*
Implication: Paul is referring to a woman's *own authority.*	Implication: Paul could be talking about a *man's authority* over a woman.

Notice the implications of the text differ, depending on which rendering we choose. Egalitarian interpreters will favour the idea that 'authority' refers to the authority that a woman has over her own head. Complementarian interpreters, on the other hand, will understand the 'sign of authority' as signifying a woman's head covering that represents a woman's submission to male authority (see, for example, Schreiner, 1991, p. 173).[14]

To those who are used to this idea, it may come as a surprise to learn that the term for 'sign' (or 'symbol') isn't found anywhere in the original Greek.[15] Paul doesn't explicitly state that what a woman does with her physical head is a 'sign' of anything. This is why I favour the first rendering of verse 10. The authority to which Paul refers is a woman's *own* authority.[16]

Interestingly, John Hosier agrees that 'authority' in verse 10 refers to the authority of a woman, suggesting that

> in Corinth, the Christian woman would keep a covering to show that she was in a position of security, dignity and respect from her husband and by the church … The covering actually served to underline her spiritual authority. To attend the meeting uncovered could indicate that she was rebellious in spirit … and therefore not possessing the spiritual authority and dignity necessary for her to take part effectively in a meeting (2005, p. 171).

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[14] While most complementarian churches no longer insist on head coverings for women, the principle that a woman needs to be seen to be submitted to her husband and/or to the male leaders of the church still holds currency in many churches today. One common outworking of this principle is for a woman to share with a mixed-gender congregation, but only when standing or sitting next to her husband, to convey the idea that the woman doesn't speak on her authority but under the authority of her husband.

[15] To my mind, this is what makes the ESV rendering of this verse so disappointing. The translation committee of the ESV opts for the translation, *That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head*, but does not include a footnote to alert the reader to the fact that the Greek permits a different understanding to the traditionalist view.

[16] Fee adds that the sequence of thought in verses 10 to 12 'makes it almost impossible the view that v. 10 has to do with the man's having authority over the woman' (1987, p. 522). If v. 10 was about a man's authority, we should expect the qualifier in v. 11 to read: 'Nevertheless …., man is not independent of woman.' What we actually find is the qualifier, 'Nevertheless…., woman is not independent of man', implying that v. 10 is actually about a woman's own authority (pp. 522-23).

If Hosier is correct, then a woman's head covering is a sign of her own authority as one who is under (male) authority. While I think this view is preferable to the traditionalist interpretation, I don't find it persuasive. To see why where Hosier's interpretation is problematic, we can ask, where does he get the idea of spiritual rebelliousness from? The answer is almost certainly from verse 3. Like Schreiner, Hosier is guided in his interpretation by the idea that verse 3 is about a wife's voluntary submission to her husband and/or the leaders of the church. For Hosier, a woman's head covering signifies her submission to male authority, which in turn authorizes her to share freely in the congregation by praying and prophesying out loud.

The problem with this view is that it isn't immediately clear that verse 3 is about authority/submission at all. Moreover, even if we *were* to give Hosier the benefit of the doubt and permit verse 3 to be about female submission to male authority, then we would still need to insist that the best way to interpret verse 10 is in light of verse 3. Yet, this is by no means certain.

A complementarian reading of 1 Corinthians 11:10, then, is based on two assumptions, both of which are open to challenge:

i) Verse 3 is about authority/submission
ii) The meaning of verse 3 should carry over into how we interpret the meaning of verse 10.

All this leads me to think that, where interpreting verse 10 is concerned, it's preferable to keep male authority out of it altogether. The only authority that Paul has in view in this passage is the authority that a woman possesses, by virtue of her inherent dignity, to do with her head as she wills.

What did Paul intend for the Corinthian church to understand by his statement in verse 10? I don't think it's possible to be sure. Perriman offers an intriguing suggestion, intriguing because it's based on a reconstruction of the Corinthian church that's opposite to what's been traditionally assumed:

> It has usually been assumed that the women of Corinth were radical feminists straining at the leash of Christian propriety. But what if they had adopted an essentially conservative stance? Let us suppose that it is the *men* at Corinth who had been insisting that women should pray and prophesy, like the men, with their heads uncovered as a recognition of their new spiritual equality in Christ. If the women – or some of the women, perhaps particularly Jewish women in the congregation – had resisted this departure from custom, it may be that Paul's intention in verse 10 was principally to endorse the woman's right to choose to remain covered. Then the statement 'a woman ought to have authority over her head' would mean exactly what it says (Ibid, pp. 97-98; cf. Williams, 2022, p. 115).

I think Perriman's suggestion is an attractive one, but whether Paul intended for verse 10 to carry this meaning isn't something anyone could prove. Perriman himself proposes this theory as if it were written in pencil.[17] But, whatever we make of Perriman's proposed reconstruction of the situation in the Corinthian church, I don't think there are strong grounds for saying that verse 10 is telling us about male authority over women, either directly (e.g. Schreiner) or indirectly (e.g. Hosier).

I realise that this still leaves open the question of how we understand *kephalē*'s meaning in verse 3. I'll leave this hanging until we've looked at some other important matters.

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[17] A further element of verse 10 that we can't be certain about is the curious phrase 'because of the angels.' Paul uses this phrase to provide the basis for why women should wear head coverings. For what it's worth, I think that Paul is imply referring to the popular understanding that angels are present when the church gathers for worship (Morris, 1988, p. 153; Hays, 1997, p. 188). There could be a link between what Paul says here and what he writes in 1 Corinthians 4:9-10: 'For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ…! We are dishonoured!' It may be that Paul's mention of angels in both places is a rhetorical device intended to underline 'the extremity of … shame' (Perriman, 1998, p. 101). Perhaps we're to understand Paul as saying: 'If a woman is prevented or dissuaded from wearing a head covering, it's not only to her own shame and the shame of her husband; it even offends the angels!'

ii) Is there a prohibition here that's binding for us today?

For complementarians, all the talk of head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11 points to an essential principle that transcends cultural norms, namely, the fact that public worship should be ordered in such a way that reflects the *distinction* between men and women. Men are created to lead; women are created to submit to male authority. This means that Paul's prohibition on women praying or prophesying in public with their heads uncovered points to an important, timeless principle: women shouldn't contribute to public church meetings in a way that contravenes the essential asymmetry between women and men.

Complementarians differ on the precise nature of the prohibition that applies to women; however, they are generally agreed that there is some, legitimate, biblical prohibition that applies to women – what they can and can't do in public worship today. Traditionally, complementarians appeal to 1 Corinthians as providing two distinct grounds for that position:

- What Paul says about the trinity, and:
- What he says about the order of creation of men and women.

The trinity

The idea that relationships within the Trinity – notably the relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son – provides a model for how men and women should relate to one another has long been central to the complementarian perspective. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 11:3, Schreiner explains: 'Since Paul appeals to the relation between members of the Trinity, it is clear that he does not view the relations described here as merely cultural, or the result of the fall' (Ibid, p. 162). John Hosier follows Schreiner in arguing that Paul's reference to the Trinity in this passage is significant for the ordering of human relationships:

> [1 Corinthians 11:3] upholds the vital doctrine known by theologians as the 'Economy of the Trinity'. An understanding of this is essential to an appreciation of the Bible's whole teaching on submission. There is only one God, but in three Persons: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The three Persons of the Trinity are co-equal and co-eternal, but the Trinity functions 'economically', so the Son submits to the Father, and the Spirit to the Father and Son. This is a voluntary submission that allows the work of salvation to be accomplished, but in this submission there is no lack of equality in essence within the Godhead. … This pattern of equality with submission in the Godhead, helps us to see God's order for the relationship between and wife, and for the relationship between leaders and women in the church (Ibid, p. 169).

Let's begin by noting three elements to the classic complementarian position as outlined by Schreiner and Hosier. Firstly, notice the centrality of the Trinity to their thinking. In Hosier's words, understanding the relationship of the Father to the Son is 'essential to an appreciation of the Bible's whole teaching on submission.' Secondly, notice how Schreiner regards Paul's argument from the Trinity as providing grounds for saying that male authority/female submission neither reflects culture, nor originated with the fall, but represents God's good design for male-female relationships at all times and places. Finally, Schreiner adds that this matter is 'clear.'

Unfortunately, I don't think the matter is quite as straightforward as Schreiner and Hosier suggest.[18] The fact is that, outside of 1 Corinthians 11, Paul never again mentions the Trinity in connection with male-

[18] For one thing, we need to heed the warning, made by Matt Hosier in his paper for the Newfrontiers Theology Forum, not to 'over-[read] gender roles into the Trinity' (2013, p. 4). What Matthew Hosier has in mind is a particular view of the trinity called 'eternal functional subordination.' This is the idea, argued quite forcibly by some complementarian scholars, that while the Son is ontologically equal to the Father, he's also eternally subordinate to the Father. In other words, the Son's submission to the Father didn't begin with the incarnation. It defines the Son's eternal relationship to the Father.

female relationships. Nor does he make any link in this passage between the Trinity and voluntary submission. In fact, voluntary submission isn't mentioned anywhere in the text.

Then there's the additional problem that, in verse 3, Paul mentions, not *two* pairs of relationships, but *three*:

> The head of every man is Christ;
> The head of the woman is man;
> The head of Christ is God.

Complementarians have traditionally highlighted the parallels between the second and third pairs of relationships. It's possible to argue from this text that the Son's voluntary submission to the Father while being equal to the Father provides a model for female-male relationships, but what do we do with the first statement? No one would argue that men are ontologically equal to *Christ*. If we're being consistent, how does this first statement fit in the complementarian scheme?

Schreiner's answer is to suggest that Paul's purpose in the first two statements is to major on the theme of authority (Ibid, p. 165). Christ has authority over man. Man has authority over woman. But then Paul includes the third statement as if to say, 'Lest anyone gets the wrong idea, remember that God is also the head of Christ and no one would say that this makes him superior to Christ. So, don't think for one moment that I'm implying that men and superior to women, or women inferior to men' (my paraphrase).[19] If Schreiner is right, then the fact that the three statements in verse 3 aren't exact parallels shouldn't be regarded as being a problem. What they point to is a *development* in Paul's thought.

My view

Schreiner may be right in making this supposition. The problem, of course, is that Paul doesn't make his working clear. But we're still left with a problem which leaves me somewhat suspicious about appealing to the Trinity to argue for female submission to male authority. The problem is that nowhere at this stage of the argument does Paul mention the themes of authority and submission. And if the earlier discussion on verse 10 is accepted, then Paul doesn't refer to male authority anywhere in this passage *at all.*

One of the most famous advocates of eternal functional subordination is Wayne Grudem (1994, pp. 459-60; 2012). I remember Grudem arguing for this view of the Trinity at a Newfrontiers leadership conference in connection with gender roles in 2002. Here's what he said: 'The idea of headship and submission in personal relationship never began. It has always existed in the eternal nature of God himself. Therefore, submission to authority is a noble virtue. … When we begin to dislike the idea of authority and submission, we are beginning to dislike the idea of God himself.'

While scholars like Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware continue to advocate for eternal functional subordination, in recent years the idea that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father has received a considerable backlash from the theological community, including from many evangelical scholars (see discussion in Williams, 2022, pp. 56-58 & 111-12; Johnson, undated). Critics of eternal functional subordination often contrast it with another view called 'the economic trinity'. This is the idea that, while the Son is ontologically equal to the Father, he is not *eternally* subordinate to the Father but willingly submitted to the will of the Father *for the sake of our salvation*. This is where John Hosier is coming from in the quote above. It's also reflected in Thomas Schreiner's discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:3 in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* where he writes that 'there is a subordination in function' but 'an equality of essence' in 'the *economic Trinity'* (Ibid, p. 164, emphasis mine).

I think that, even if eternal functional subordination is off the table, it's still *possible* to make a case for the economic Trinity providing the model for male-female relationships (Smith, 2017, fn. 3). See, for example, the discussion in Liston, 2023, p. 115. The question is: is this really what Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians 11:3? I think the case is unproven.

[19] Paul does a similar thing later in the passage, where vv. 11-12 provide a clarification to the argument in vv. 7-10. Once again, the sense one gets from vv. 11-12 is that he's saying, 'Lest anyone gets the wrong the idea…'

Which raises a question: what if the ideas of authority and submission aren't actually the key to unlocking the meaning of the text? This is not to suggest that the idea of authority is entirely absent from Paul's understanding of *kephalē*. It may well be implicit in how Paul conceives of headship. My point is that 'headship as authority' isn't front and centre to the argument that Paul is making here. Paul takes the argument in a different direction.

What, then, is the argument about? I think 1 Corinthians 11 is about 'who brings glory to whom', not 'who's in charge.' Paul introduces the Trinity to establish the idea that there's an 'ordering' of relationships, both in heaven and on earth. Man brings glory to Christ. Christ brings glory to God. And, yes, woman brings glory to man. In my opinion, the prominence view of headship is the best fit for the data in verse 3.

All this is written in pencil. I may be wrong. And I don't think that complementarians are mistaken in pointing to the economic Trinity as a model for how functional subordination is *logically consistent* with ontological equality. I just don't think that that's the point Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 11:3. I'm not convinced that Paul uses the Trinity to support the ideas of male authority and female subordination, either here or anywhere else.

The order of creation of men and women

Typically, complementarian scholars argue that 1 Corinthians 11 provides two, separate grounds for male authority and female submission. The first, as we've seen, is rooted in what Paul says about the Trinity. The second is rooted in what Paul says about creation.

Once more, our primary complementarian source is Thomas Schreiner. Here's what he says on the subject of creation:

> Paul argues from creation, not from the fall. The distinctions between male and female are part of the created order, and Paul apparently did not think redemption in Christ negated creation.
>
> Paul uses an argument from source, which is rooted in the order of creation, to support the idea of a difference in roles between men and women.
>
> [H]e grounds the distinction between men and women in creation. (1991, pp. 169-70).

The relevant material in our chapter is as follows:

> **1 Corinthians 11:7-10**
> *A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority on her head, because of the angels.*

Let's begin by noticing what *isn't* mentioned in these verses. Once again, there's no explicit reference to male authority and female submission. This matters, because if this is supposed to be the 'big idea' in Paul's argument, then we might expect to find something like the following:

> *A man ought not to cover his head, since he represents God's authority in his relationship with women; but woman is subordinate to man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man…*

In saying this, I don't wish to imply that complementarian scholars like Schreiner are distorting the text by making it say what they want it to say. *If* you hold that Paul's use of *kephalē* in verse 3 is about authority and submission, then it's entirely consistent to carry that idea forward into the next section and hold that these verses follow that same theme.

However, in their immediate context, Paul's mention of the order of creation in verses 8 and 9 isn't to say that man is head of woman (as he does in verse 3), but that *woman is the glory of man.*

What does Paul mean by this? Unfortunately, it's not immediately clear. Schreiner holds that the phrase means that the woman is created to honour man (Ibid, p. 169). I think he's right to recognise that honour and dishonour are central to what's going on here.[20] Paul seems to be reiterating the point that a woman praying with her head uncovered would bring disgrace on her husband.

Andrew Perriman suggests there may be something else going on these verses. He sees in verse 9 – 'man did not come from woman, but woman from man' – a nod to the idea that woman was created 'as the sexual counterpart to the man' (1998, p. 181). The ideas of female 'attractiveness, … sexuality, … reputation … [and] status' all flow together for Paul and, when combined with the distinctive Jewish notion that the head is associated with honour and glory, move him to insist that the Corinthian women conceal their 'glory' by covering their heads in worship (Ibid, p. 94).

I think he may be onto something here. Recall David Instone-Brewer's suggestion that a modern-day equivalent of a woman failing to wear a head covering in worship may be a female member of the congregation coming to the front to lead the congregation in prayer wearing a bikini top. Why would that be inappropriate? There would be several reasons. Notions of female sexuality ('She's flaunting her body in a way that awakens sexual desire'), social decorum ('This isn't the time or place'), the effect on the reputation of the church leaders ('Why didn't they stop her from taking the microphone?') and on her husband, if she has one ('Isn't he embarrassed by the conduct of his wife?'), all flow together. I suggest that something like that is going on in Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 11. And this is why, perhaps, it shouldn't surprise us that the flow of Paul's thought is so difficult to elucidate. Conceptually, the passage is exceedingly dense, and it couldn't really be otherwise. There lots of things going on simultaneously.

My view

I don't think it's possible to ignore the fact that, for Paul, the 'firstness' of the man in the creation story has some bearing on how we should understand the relationships between women and men today. A complementarian position of these verses does carry some weight. How exactly we're supposed to understand that prominence in our time is less clear, however.

What Paul *doesn't* do in 1 Corinthians 11 is use the order of creation to argue directly for male authority and female subordination. Rather, his argument concerns the issues of glory and shame. Behind the entire passage is 'a basic cultural assumption, that a woman's appearance and behaviour reflect upon her husband either to enhance or impair his reputation' (Perriman, 1998, p. 93). In Paul's first-century context, men held the prominent positions in the home and wider society. In consequence, if a wife was considered to have behaved dishonourably, her shame would attach to her husband. This is the key to unlocking the passage's meaning. Paul is exercised about head coverings, not because women Corinth are being insubordinate, but because they're bringing shame on their husbands.[21]

The themes of honour and shame are cultural qualities. What's deemed honourable or shameful is *culturally determined.* From beginning to end this passage has a strong cultural flavour.[22] Yet, at one and

[20] The idea that 'glory' relates to 'honour' is implied later in verses 14 and 15 where Paul presents a contrast between man's 'disgrace' (dishonour) with woman's 'glory'.

[21] Women behaving shamefully in the church might also impact on the reputation of the church leaders. It's possible that Paul was also motivated to write these words because of his concern for how the church was perceived by outsiders.

[22] I think this is evident in verses 14 and 15a, as Paul comes into land: 'Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?' Schreiner sees in these verses a statement about human beings having an inherent appreciation of the 'created order' (Ibid, p. 174-75). This seems to me a bit of a stretch. I prefer Gordon Fee's take on these verses where he says: 'For [Paul]

the same time, Paul *does* appeal to the order of creation to establish the principle that there are creational differences between women and men.

To my mind, egalitarian scholar Andrew Perriman doesn't satisfactorily account for the creation data in the text. But I also think there's a danger of complementarian scholars like Thomas Schreiner making too much the order of creation and insisting, based on their reading of Genesis 2, that what Paul is *really* talking about is male authority and female submission. I don't think that's right, either, but I also have to admit: I've not got this text sewn up.[23]

The world in front of the text

Practically every commentator begins their exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 by acknowledging it to be an extraordinarily difficult passage. Nevertheless, I think there are several take-home points that are relevant to our situation today:

- My personal view is that text can't be used to justify male authority and female subordination. Paul's statement in verse 3 that 'the head of woman is man' has to do with honour and shame and not with male authority or leadership. Later in the passage, Paul takes us away from the notion that the differences between men and women require men to exercise authority over women, emphasising instead a woman's own authority (v. 10), before hammering home the principles of male-female mutuality and interdependence (vv. 11 & 12 – see the Introduction). My opinion that headship in this passage refers to a man's social prominence is unlikely to convince someone with strong complementarian convictions. I don't think that matters, so long as we recognise that the complexities of the issues involved in interpreting 1 Corinthians 11 make coming down in favour of any definitive viewpoint extremely difficult.

- However, an element of the complementarian view does find clear support in this passage: Paul teaches that there are essential, creational differences between women and men. How these differences are worked out in the church will be informed, at least in part, by culture. Where a culture is patriarchal, Paul believes that cultural gender distinctives should be observed in the church to avoid shame. Where a culture isn't patriarchal … well, this is precisely where the controversy between the complementarian and egalitarian positions arises. What would Paul say to our 21st century, western culture? We can't be 100 percent sure. What's important is that gender distinctives between women and men are recognised. Paul is working with the biblical picture of gender complementarity – of distinction *and* union – all the time.

- The extended discussion of male headship and female head coverings can cause us to miss the obvious point that women as well as men contributed vocally to church gatherings in Corinth. Teaching isn't mentioned but it's clear that, so long as certain cultural expectations were satisfied, Paul thought that women should be involved in praying and prophesying in worship gatherings (v. 5). Paul is supportive of the women in the Church in Corinth making their voices heard. Moreover, in urging the use of head coverings, his burden is to make it easier, not harder, for women to contribute. Let's be clear on this point: Paul's agenda is exactly the *opposite* to subjugating women. Hays explains: 'Paul promulgates his teaching about head coverings for women not in order to restrict their participation in prayer and prophecy but rather to enable them to perform these activities

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this is not an appeal to Nature, or to "natural law," or to "natural endowment" … Rather, for Paul it is a question of propriety and of "custom" (vv. 13, 16)… [It] is an appeal to the "way things are"…, to the "natural feeling" that they shared together as part of their contemporary culture' (1987, p. 527).

[23] I'm in good company. Preston Sprinkle, whose blog posts on the meaning of *kephalē* I've found to be extremely helpful, says that he's 50-60% confident that he understands what's going on in 1 Corinthians 11, before saying: 'I don't know if I'll ever be more than 80% sure' (2024a).

with dignity, avoiding distractions for people whose cultural sensibilities were formed by the social conventions of the ancient Mediterranean world. Anyone who appeals to this passage to silence women … in the church is flagrantly misusing the text' (1997, p. 191).[24]

I'm content to let that be the last word.

[24] The complete quotation from Hays goes as follows: 'Anyone who appeals to this passage to silence women *or to deny them leadership roles* in the church is flagrantly misusing the text' (emphasis mine). Unfortunately, Hays takes a misstep. While I don't think that 1 Corinthians 11 establishes that women *shouldn't* have leadership roles in the Church in the 21st century, nor can the passage be used to argue that they *should*. This simply isn't Paul's concern in the text, no matter how much the issue may concern us today.

1 Corinthians 14:33-35

33For God is not a God of disorder but of peace – as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.

34Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. 35If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

Overview of concerns

	1 Corinthians 14:33-35
What's being prohibited?	Women speaking in church meetings
What does the text say about male authority and female submission?	Possible reference to male headship
What are the grounds for saying that there's a timeless principle here?	Possible reference to the order of creation

This passage presents a unique and especially knotty set of problems. The most glaring of these is the fact that, just a few verses earlier, Paul seems to imply that any member of the congregation – male or female – can contribute to the worship gathering: When you come together, *each of you* has a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. … For you can *all prophesy* in turn, so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged (14:26 & 31, emphasis mine). Moreover, our discussion of 1 Corinthians 11 above has shown us that Paul had no problem with the women in Corinth praying and prophesying out loud in meetings. His reason for insisting on head coverings is not to shut them up but to enable them to contribute to church meetings with dignity and without a hint of shame.

What, then, are we to we to make of this passage? One approach to resolving the issues, associated especially with the New Testament scholar Gordon Fee (1987, pp. 699-705; cf. Hays, 1997, pp. 245-48), is to argue that verses 34-35 weren't originally written by Paul; in Fee's own words: 'They were first written as a gloss in the margin by someone who … felt the need to qualify Paul's instructions' (Ibid, p. 705). A detailed examination of Fee's argument needn't concern us here. Suffice to say that the majority of scholars are unpersuaded by Fee's analysis.[25] His remains a minority view.

The world behind the text

Several different ways of resolving the problem have been proposed over the years. Here are two of them, each of which is based on a different reconstruction of the world behind the text. If we were able to step into a time machine and visit the church in Corinth in the first century, what would we expect to see?

Scenario 1: Women were getting involved in discussions that evaluated prophecy

This view is associated with complementarian scholar Wayne Grudem[26] and championed by D. A. Carson in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.* According to this view, the problem in Corinth was not that women were speaking per se, but that they were weighing prophecies, and thus stepping into an authoritative role that Paul considered to be restricted to men.

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[25] D. A. Carson presents a line-by-line response to Fee (1991, pp. 180-85; cf. Perriman, 1998, pp. 103-7). I find Carson's points of rebuttal of Fee's argument convincing, although I feel that any convictions concerning this text can only ever be written in pencil.

[26] *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (1982).

Proponents of this view point out that it seems to fit well with the flow of the passage. Paul begins with a discussion of the gift of tongues. After a general observation in verse 26, Paul moves on to practical guidelines concerning the use of tongues in public gatherings (vv. 27-28). Then Paul does the exact same thing with prophecy. Beginning with a headline statement that references speaking and weighing (v. 29), Paul proceeds by giving practical guidelines concerning each of these two activities in turn (speaking in vv. 30-33a and weighing in vv. 33b-36) (Carson, 1991, p. 195).

It's a neat argument but I don't find it persuasive.[27] John Hosier agrees, arguing that 'such an interpretation strains the passage – it seems nowhere near the natural and commonsense interpretation that hermeneutical principles demand' (2005, p. 175). If Paul thinks that women shouldn't be involved in discussions about prophetic words, then why doesn't he just come out and say so? I think we need to consider a different possibility about what was happening in Corinth.

Scenario 2: women were being vocal when it wasn't their turn to stand up and speak

This is perhaps the most common view taken by interpreters of this passage. The idea is that Paul had no problem with women contributing to meetings, so long as they had their head covered (1 Corinthians 11), and that they stood and shared when it was their turn to do so (1 Corinthians 14:30). The problem appears to be that women in Corinth weren't speaking in their turn; they were speaking at other times as well. If we were to visit them in our time machine, we might witness such things as the women chatting among themselves, calling out questions to the speaker, offering unsolicited opinions or having spontaneous prophetic outbursts when someone else was already speaking. All these things contravened Paul's basic concern that 'everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way' (v. 40).

But why does Paul specifically focus his prohibition on *women*? Some have speculated that the answer may be found in the fact that women were not as well educated as the men. Perhaps the women were chattier than the men because they were asking one another what was going on?[28] It's an attractive hypothesis, but there are problems. Carson explains:

> The argument that some of the women were too noisy cannot be taken very seriously, for we must ask why Paul bars *all* women from talking. And were there *no* noisy men? Nor is it plausible that the women are silenced because they were uneducated; for again, we must ask why Paul doesn't silence uneducated *people*, not just women. And since Paul's rule operates in all the churches (vv. 33b-34), it would be necessary to hold that *all* first-century Christian women were uneducated – which is palpable nonsense (Ibid, p. 188).

My own view is that it's entirely possible that men in the church were being as disorderly as women. However, Paul regards the conduct of the *women* as being especially problematic. Why might this be? I suspect the answer may be found in another aspect of the world behind the text: the wider context in which Paul was writing.

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[27] Fee himself deals with this view in his commentary, where he sets out the following points: (i) there's a 'closure' element to vv. 32-33, meaning that there's a definite break between what Paul says about prophecy in vv. 29-31 and what he says about women in vv. 34-35; (ii) there's no hint in vv. 34-35 that Paul has weighing prophecy in mind, or that the phrase 'they must be in submission' relates to submission to male authority; (iii) the statement 'if they want to enquire about something' (v. 35) suggests that what Paul has in mind is a woman's desire to understand what's going on, not to evaluate prophetic words (1987, p. 704; cf. Perriman, 1998, pp. 111-12).

[28] 'We must bear in mind that in the first century women were uneducated. … The Corinthians women should keep quiet in church for no other reason than because they could have had little or nothing worth while to say' (Morris, 1988, pp. 197-98).

Cultural context

Christians are fond of saying that the gospel mounts a powerful challenge to existing social divisions. It requires that we revise all traditional understandings of human society that are based on hierarchy. All this is true. It's why Paul declares that 'all are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28) and insists on the mutuality of men and women (1 Corinthians 7:4; 11:11-12). However, Paul also accommodates his message to culture. And throughout his letters, he's frequently concerned with the need to safeguard the reputation of the churches.

Paul's culture was patriarchal, and not mildly so; it was patriarchal in a profound, dyed-in-the-wool sense. Men and women (and children and slaves) occupied different positions in the hierarchy of being. So, when we see how exercised Paul is about *women's* disorderly conduct in the church, it needs to be understood in light of the culture of his day. Perriman suggests that there are three features of Paul's world that we need to keep in mind (1998, pp. 114-19):

- In Greco-Roman culture, women were prohibited from contributing to the public assembly. They were expected to remain silent and were unable to vote.
- Jewish society allowed women to play significant roles in the synagogue, but it's unlikely that they would have been permitted to officiate in worship.
- There were religious cults that promoted the participation of women and frequently attracted the criticism of outsiders who viewed these novel faiths as a threat to the moral and social fabric of society.

Given this background, it becomes easier to see why Paul was at pains to focus his attention on curbing what many would have regarded as the unruly and unseemly conduct of women in church gatherings. Such behaviour would have done nothing to commend the gospel to Gentiles or Jews and risked outsiders writing off the new Jesus movement as being just like the 'mystery religions' of the day. To put it another way: people in Paul's day would have been less concerned about noisy or chatty *men*; it would have been noisy or chatty *women* that would have created greater consternation.

Not everyone accepts that this is a relevant consideration for understanding our text. D. A. Carson (who supports our first possible scenario) rejects this view on the grounds that it would make Paul 'unbearably sexist' (Carson, 1991, p. 188)? I don't agree with Carson that Paul's concern for the reputation of his churches makes him sexist; I think it makes him canny and wise. Terran Williams explains: 'Paul was not idealizing the culture the church was trying to reach, but instead was, out of evangelistic intention, trying to accommodate to its social decorum without compromising key values' (2022, p. 124).

An interesting consequence of recognising the presence of Paul's 'reputational concern' behind this letter is that it makes it far less important to try and reconstruct the specific set of circumstances of the Corinthian church. Perhaps Paul was thinking of women calling in the meetings when he wrote this passage. Perhaps he was thinking of women chatting among themselves. It's even possible that he was thinking of women contributing to general discussions that included, among other things, the weighing of prophecy. We simply don't know. And I don't think it's necessary for us to know. *Whatever* the women were up to in the church in Corinth, Paul insists that they recognise their place: *not* because they are any less than men, not because he's 'anti-women', but because the gospel needs to be sensitively and appropriately worked out in their social reality.[29]

[29] David Instone-Brewer is an example of a contemporary scholar who believes that all the New Testament passages about men and women are heavily influenced by first-century Greco-Roman culture and hence don't communicate binding principles for us today (2009a & b, 2013, 2022). I've found Instone-Brewer's articles in *Christianity* magazine to be quite insightful but do think he goes too far. Andrew Wilson (2013) challenges the 'God never said it' brand of egalitarianism that he perceives in Brewer's 2013 article. Incidentally, this paper is well worth a look for Wilson's discussion of the five different varieties of Egalitarianism.

The world of the text

My suggestion that Paul's concern for the reputation of the church and the gospel is central to unlocking the meaning of the passage is contentious. Some complementarian interpreters will be uneasy with the notion that Paul's words here are shaped excessively by cultural considerations. So, let's consider two features of the text that might be considered to point in a different direction. Both come from the same verse:

> **1 Corinthians 14:34**
> *Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.*

i) What does the text say about male authority and female submission?

Firstly, we need to deal with Paul's reference to women being in submission. Who or what is he enjoining them to submit to? To male authority? To apostolic authority? Or, in light of the verse immediately preceding this one, to a principle of order that applies to all the churches with which Paul is associated?

Many complementarians will see in this verse a clear reference to male authority. They may be right. However, I'm not sure that we necessarily need to choose between the things in our list. Perhaps Paul is telling the women to submit to the requirement of order in worship through conduct that demonstrates that they are submissive to their husbands – and to submit to his apostolic command in doing so![30]

Is there a clue to Paul's meaning in the phrase, 'as the law says'? It looks like Paul sees 'the law' as providing the ground for his command to women to submit. This brings us to our second question.

ii) Is there a prohibition here that's binding for us today?

Unfortunately, this is where matters get foggy. Clearly, Paul sees a link between what the law says and female submission. But what does he mean by 'the law'.

Carson sees a reference here to the scriptural (Old Testament) pattern concerning male and female roles, suggesting that Paul is invoking the creation narrative of God creating the woman from man in Genesis 2:20b-24. He explains:

> Paul understands from this creation order that woman is to be subject to man – or at least that wife is to be subject to husband. In the context of the Corinthian weighing of prophecies, such submission could not be preserved if the wives participated (1991, pp. 194-95).

Carson argues that what this interpretation has going for it is the fact that, while Paul doesn't mention Genesis 2 here, he *does* mention Genesis in other passages that prohibit or restrict women speaking. The passages he has in mind are 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 and 1 Timothy 2:13. Carson suggests that the reason that Paul uses such general language here is that 'he has *already* referred to the text he has in mind', in 1 Corinthians 11 (Ibid, p. 190, emphasis mine). Simon Kistemaker follows a similar line of argument (although he excludes 1 Timothy 2 from his analysis), noting that 'Paul consistently appeals to the creation account of Genesis 2 throughout this epistle' (1993, p. 512). He cites 1 Corinthians 11 as well as 6:16, which includes a quotation from Genesis 2:24.

What are we to make of the idea that Paul's reference to 'the law' in 1 Corinthians 14 is intended to be understood to invoke the creation of men and women in Genesis 2? For me, the approach taken by

[30] This is an extension of a thought from Andrew Perriman: 'Perhaps we should think of submission to the husband as the underlying rationale for the more general submission to the order of worship' (1998, p. 122).

Carson and Kistemaker strains credulity. There's no logical connection between Paul's arguments in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, and 1 Timothy 2 was written considerably later. Although Kistemaker introduces 1 Corinthians 6:16 into his argument, this still leaves us with two places in the whole letter where Paul explicitly refers to Genesis 2. This leaves us far short of the notion that Paul 'consistently appeals to the creation account … throughout this epistle.'

Then there's the problem that Genesis 2 doesn't say explicitly that women should be silent and submissive. Carson and Kistemaker's argument about what Paul's saying in 1 Corinthians 14 is based on a set of assumptions about the meaning of the creation story in Genesis 2. Yet, as we saw in Paper 1, these assumptions are open to question.

So, what *does* Paul intend for his readers to understand with mention of 'the law'? I really don't know. The best I can offer is that, presumably, what's unclear to us today would have made sense to his original audience. But all is not lost. Perhaps we can find help for knowing how best to understand Paul's meaning from other places in the text. Because when we look at verses 34 and 35 in the context of what's going around them, we find, not just one ground for Paul's appeal to the women of Corinth (*'as the law says'*), but a further three (Perriman, 1998, pp. 123-34):

i) *Paul appeals to custom* (*'as in all the congregations of the Lord's people…'*, v. 33b). This suggests that Paul's intention is to bring practice in the Corinthian church into line with practice in other congregations (in fact, this is a significant concern for Paul through this epistle[31]). This may suggest that, in this passage, Paul isn't referring to 'an absolute and incontestable ruling' but to 'well-established guidelines for dealing with a current situation' (Ibid, p. 125).

ii) *Paul appeals to shame* (*'For it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church'*, v. 35b). This appeal is much clearer than the last. Andrew Perriman regards it as being the decisive one for unlocking the meaning of this text (Ibid, pp. 131-32). I think he may be right.

Let's think for a moment about the issues of honour and shame (representing two sides of the same coin). The point of honour/shame is that they mark deviation from an accepted social norm rather than necessarily transgressing an absolute command. Kenneth Bailey remarks that 'the cultural equivalent in English might be the Victorian sense of "improper." *Ladies* do not chat during worship. It is "not done"' (2011, p. 417). Note the connection here with our discussion of 1 Corinthians 11. Paul is working with the categories of honour/shame all the time. Sometimes a practice is wrong, not because it violates a timeless principle, but because it deviates from a social norm. This provides grounds for believing that Paul's particular concern is with problems that threaten to bring the church and its message into disrepute.

iii) *Paul appeals to the Lord's command* (*'… let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command'*, v. 37). Some might argue that this statement makes it clear that Paul is issuing an absolute command rather than appealing to conformity with a cultural custom. However, not all commands are absolute and universal; some are specific to a particular context: 'Do not walk on the grass.' 'No diving in the pool.' 'Children are not permitted in the kitchen.'

What we end up making of this statement will depend, in large part, on how closely we think it connects with the section on women. I personally incline towards the view that verses 36 and 37 function as a kind of summary statement for a broader argument that begins much earlier. This would make Paul's mention of 'the Lord's command' a less relevant consideration than (i) and (ii).

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[31] Carson notes how Paul is at pains throughout the letter to call the church in Corinth 'to return to the common practice and perspective of the other churches' (1:2; 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33) (Ibid, p. 193).

My view

To my mind, of all the things I've read on this difficult passage, Kenneth Bailey's thoughts are most helpful (see (ii) above). I think that Paul is concerned with correcting conduct that would have been regarded as 'improper' according to the customs of the day. His concern is that nothing should happen in the church that might bring the gospel into disrepute.

Let's conduct a thought experiment and consider the kind of report that may have come Paul's way concerning the church in Corinth. 'Have you heard about their meetings? Have you heard about how the *women* are behaving? "Unruly" doesn't do it justice. They're out of control! I don't know why the leaders stand for it. And where are the husbands? How can they think it's okay for their wives to carry on in this manner? And in full public view! I wouldn't have anything to do with that kind of community, would you? And what does it say about the kind of *God* that they worship?'

Admittedly, this is speculation on my part, but it does communicate, I think, why Paul might have regarded disorderly conduct on the part of women as being such a problem. The reputation of the church and the gospel were at stake! In fact, there are a couple of occasions in the New Testament where both Paul and Peter urge particular conduct on the part of women because of a stated desire to safeguard the reputation of the gospel (Titus 2:5 & 1 Peter 3:1. Titus 2:10 and 1 Peter 2:15 are also worth a look). I'm suggesting that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is another of those passages.

This means that Paul's command that *'women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to* speak' is not directly applicable to our situation today. I appreciate that this conclusion is contentious. For some, it will appear to represent a step on a slippery slope that leads, inexorably, to liberalism. However, it's important to hear what I'm not saying. I'm not advocating that we dismiss scriptural commands simply because we consider them to be unpalatable. We're never justified in producing our own version of Thomas Jefferson's famous Bible, where every passage that he considered to be irrelevant, outdated or downright awkward was carefully removed.

No, what I'm suggesting is that, through his letters, Paul is concerned with two things, not just one: fidelity to God's Word *in* the Church, and how the Church is perceived by people *outside* the Church. He's committed to biblical faithfulness *and* missional relevance.

The world in front of the text

What are the take-home points for our situation today? While there are many difficulties associated with interpreting this passage, I believe the following three points can be stated with reasonable confidence:

- Firstly, I think there are too many indications of the cultural flavour of this passage to universalize the principle that 'women should remain silent in the churches.' Paul is *not* issuing a timeless command that women shouldn't contribute to public meetings.

- Secondly, what Paul has to say about the conduct of women is set within a broader argument about order in meetings. 'For God is not a God of disorder but of peace' (v. 33). 'Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way' (v. 40). I consider this to be the primary principle in the passage, and this principle *does* have universal application.

- Thirdly, I think 1 Corinthians 14 sensitizes us to the fact that church practice is *always* contextualized to a particular culture. While it's unclear whether Paul includes a timeless, theological principle for why women should remain silent (I think this question is left open), he does insist that women conform to social norms. The prominence of the theme of shame in the passage suggests that his primary motivation may be to safeguard the reputation of the gospel. Our culture is very different to Paul's and requires us to do the hard work of contextualising the gospel to *our* time and place.

Now I'm going to stick my neck out, and suggest two further points that follow from this final one:

- Part of the process of contextualization is ensuring that we don't a-critically adopt or replicate practices that unnecessarily bring the gospel into disrepute. The word 'unnecessarily' is important. The faithful preaching of the gospel will always cause offence. Our responsibility isn't to soften the uncompromising command of Christ to 'deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34). Our responsibility is to remove any *unnecessary* obstacles that may make it harder for people to give the message of Christ a hearing.

- Throughout history, there have been churches and movements that have used 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 to teach that women should remain silent in church meetings. That made a lot of sense in Paul's world, but it doesn't make any sense in the contemporary world. I would go further and say that, if we were to apply this prohibition to women in our church context, it would constitute an unnecessary obstacle to belief. It would do nothing for the reputation of the church or the gospel in the eyes of unbelievers.

Yes, we need to abide by the presumption of obedience when we read any biblical command. But, as Andrew Wilson points out, the presumption of obedience means doing what the text says *unless* there are good biblical reasons not to do so (2012; 2018, p. 109). In the case of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, I think there are features in the text itself which point to Paul's command being context-specific. I hope that the above discussion has shown that my position isn't a consequence of dismissing the text or trying to explain it away; it's a consequence of making a genuine attempt to allow the text to speak on its own terms.

Conclusion

At an earlier point in this paper, I introduced a quote from *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* where John Piper and Wayne Grudem acknowledge their fallibility and the provisional nature of some of their conclusions (see pp. 9 & 10). Commentators are generally agreed that 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 and 14:33-35 are among the most difficult in the New Testament. I love the following comment by Preston Sprinkle on 1 Corinthians 11, who says that he's 50-60% confident that he understands what's going on in 1 Corinthians 11, before remarking: 'I don't know if I'll ever be more than 80% sure' (2024a).

That seems to me to be the proper attitude for any interpreter of Paul. To repeat Piper and Grudem's words: 'We are keenly aware of our fallibility. … The history of exegesis does not encourage us that we will have the final word on this issue, and we hope we are not above correction (1991, p. 105).

We hope we are not above correction. Through this paper, I've acknowledged that there may be things I've got wrong. In the above discussion, I suggest that these passages have relatively little to say about the timeless principles of male authority and female submission and a good deal to say about how Paul's instructions were informed by first-century cultural expectations of men and women. Consequently, I find no justification in these passages for restricting women's contributions to public worship today. But I don't think for one moment that I've got everything sewn up. There are still some things that I'm working through.

It's also true to say that we haven't yet arrived at the most important of our difficult passages concerning gender roles in the church. This is the subject of my next paper.

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