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# On Creation, New Creation and the Natural Order: A Theological Reading of 1 Corinthians 11.2–16

JENNIFER THWEATT-BATES

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1 Corinthians 11 is one of those tortured and tortuous passages with a history of conflicting interpretations. Within our fellowship, it is used by advocates of women's leadership within the church, who point out, quite reasonably, that the prophesying taken for granted in the passage indicates a vocal and public role. Yet it is also employed by advocates of the quiet submission of women in the church assembly, who point, quite reasonably, to the "headship" verse at the opening of the chapter. This woeful stalemate has resulted in the unfortunate situation that, when reading the passage, it is nearly impossible not to read it without a presumptive focus on one element or the other, rendering it difficult, to say the least, to understand what might be going on in the passage as a whole.

It might be tempting to look at the issue addressed in the passage, the matter of wearing or not wearing head coverings while prophesying, and dismiss it as an obviously cultural matter—female dress code, being, after all, one of those matters which nearly everyone can agree is a matter of relative cultural standards. But this would be a mistake; for this obviously cultural matter of dress code carries with it symbolic, theological import. It's not a mere matter of modesty or standards of propriety being disputed. It's a matter of what the head coverings *mean*. It is this theological meaning that is at stake in the dispute; it is this that Paul undertakes to address.

In this essay I will offer a theological reading of 1 Cor 11.2–16 that takes the matter at issue to be one of competing theological authorities, and the stakes of the dispute to be nothing less than the inclusion of women as sharers in the *imago Dei*. Is it the Creator God, or "Nature itself," who determines the status of women vis-à-vis men, and therefore what is appropriate for each? The outcome of the overt theological dispute over the status of women as participants or non-participants in the *imago Dei* depends, at least in part, upon the underlying issue of the competing theological authorities in the passage.

## A THEOLOGICAL READING OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11.2–16

What follows is not the step-by-step exegesis of a biblical scholar, nor an attempt to definitively reconstruct what Paul was "really saying" to the church in Corinth. Rather, my goal is to offer an interpretation, as one among many, focusing on the larger theological ideas moving the text: the claims and assumptions being affirmed, disputed, and renounced. First, I will argue that the practical concern regarding head coverings rests upon a theological argument from nature, drawing upon the creation narratives, for the secondary, derivative, and ultimately spiritually inferior status of women, which excludes woman from sharing in the *imago Dei* as man does. Second, I will offer verses 11–12 as Paul's answer to the Corinthians, in direct contrast to the theological position of verses 4–10. Finally, I will highlight the curious reversal of verse 14, ending with a question: How do we make sense of this theologically?

### *The Order of Creation and the Imago Dei*

Paul begins his discussion in earnest with the "headship" verse that has been so vigorously debated and

variously interpreted.<sup>1</sup> Some consider verse 3 indicative of a clear hierarchy of spiritual authority;<sup>2</sup> others, noting the asymmetry of the pairings in the verse, reject the notion of an implicit hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> As a theologian, what I find most intriguing about this verse is the end: “God is the head of Christ.” Understanding how God is the head of Christ seems to be the hermeneutical key for discerning the right relationship between the other named pairs. We therefore need to consider what Paul says elsewhere about the relationship of God to Christ in order to get a sense of what he may mean here in this shorthand phrase; elsewhere, we see that there is an intimate linkage of Christ with God, such that there is a virtual identification of the two—proto-trinitarian theology.<sup>4</sup> If Christ *is* God, then to say that Christ’s head is God is not to set up a distinct hierarchy of authority, in which two separate entities are ordered in a dominant/ subordinate pattern, for that would be to artificially separate what is actually the same. (Indeed, this misunderstanding is the classic christological heresy of subordinationism.) If this is the basis upon which Paul instructs us to understand Christ as head of man and man as head of woman, then hierarchical authority cannot be the relationship Paul is describing. Rather, Paul is making a point about identity; moreover, Paul is describing a relationship in which identity is intertwined such that there is virtually no distinction between one and the other. This is fascinating not only for what this means for the man/woman relationship, but in regard to the man/Christ pairing as well. This may be another way of getting at what Paul means by being “in Christ” or “clothed with Christ.”

As other scholars have suggested, I read the next section, 1 Cor 11.4–10, as Paul’s summary of the Corinthian position on the matter at issue.<sup>5</sup> The position for female head coverings and against male head coverings simply stated is thus: it is disgraceful for a man to cover his head, and it is disgraceful for a woman not to.

Why? Undoubtedly, there are cultural assumptions regarding male and female roles and competing religious practices in the background.<sup>6</sup> But these remain in the background, and are not explicitly mentioned or invoked as the reasons for the position being taken. Rather, the reason given is theological: “For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man” (1 Cor 11.8–9).

What, exactly, is the theological claim being made? First, the claim is that man is the image and reflection of God. This seems to be a sound, biblical and Christian claim: the allusion to Gen 1.26, “let

1. Some interpreters match 11.1 to 11.23 and argue that the entire passage is a non-Pauline interpolation. See Garry W. Trompf, “On Attitudes toward Women in Paul and Pauline Literature: 1 Corinthians 11:3–16 and Its Context,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980): 196–215; William O. Walker, “1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and Paul’s Views Regarding Women,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (1975): 94–110. But see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 228.

2. For example, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, “1 Corinthians 11:16 and the Character of Pauline Exhortation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991): 679–89; Christopher Mount, “1 Corinthians 11:3–16: Spirit Possession and Authority in a Non-Pauline Interpolation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005): 313–40; Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “Why Should Women Cover Their Heads Because of Angels? (1 Corinthians 11:10),” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 4 (2001): 205–34; Trompf, “On Attitudes toward Women,” 196–215.

3. Carroll Osburn, *Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001).

4. See, for example, 1 Cor 12.4–6; Eph 4.4–6; 2 Cor 13.13. Francis Martin, “Pauline Trinitarian Formulas and Church Unity,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 199–219; Francis Watson, “The Triune Divine Identity: Reflections on Pauline God-Language, in Disagreement with J. D. G. Dunn,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 80 (2000): 99–124.

5. Alan Padgett, “Paul on Women in the Church: The Contradictions of Coiffure in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 20 (1984): 78; Jason David BeDuhn, ““Because of the Angels”: Unveiling Paul’s Anthropology in 1 Corinthians 11,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (1999): 298.

6. Much of the scholarship on this passage concentrates on the possible cultural aspects of the Corinthian situation; for example, Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 226–28; Richard Oster, “When Men Wore Veils to Worship: The Historical Context of 1 Corinthians 11:4,” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 481–505.

us make man in our own image,” is an obvious one to both ancient and modern ears. The second claim, however, qualifies the first: “but woman is the reflection of man.” Let us note what is being omitted here. There is no mention of woman sharing in the image of God; woman is, in fact, specifically excluded, as she is under another descriptor entirely.<sup>7</sup> This in effect truncates the allusion to Genesis 1, for it does not extend to verse 27, “male and female he created them.”

The argument presses on, alluding to the second creation narrative of Genesis 2, and invoking the chronological order of creation: “Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man” (1 Cor 11.8). This chronological order is then interpreted as an order of precedence, the third theological claim: “neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man” (1 Cor 11.9). This move from chronological order to symbolic order occurs in the gap between verses 8 and 9; it is assumed as self-evident rather than argued for explicitly.

The conclusion, then, of these three theological claims, applied to the matter at hand, is summed up in verse 10a: “For this reason, a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head.”<sup>8</sup> It is important to note here that what is being concluded is not simply that women are socially inferior, but that they are *spiritually* inferior. Because women are not sharers in the *imago Dei* in the same way that men are, but are rather a reflection of the reflection, it is a spiritual—not merely social—status at issue. The conclusion of the argument is, therefore, that due to woman’s inferior spiritual nature, it is necessary for women to symbolically display their derivative nature and status.<sup>9</sup>

### *God’s Creation and New Creation*

But verse 11 signals an abrupt shift. “Nevertheless,” Paul begins, “in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God.” Engberg-Pedersen writes, “The strongly contrastive, even corrective sense of the initial *plān* should not be missed, and the content of verses 11–12 conforms with this.”<sup>10</sup> In these critical verses Paul succinctly refutes the order of creation argument summarized above. “In the Lord,” Paul says, man and woman are not considered independent, separate entities; each is essential to the other—and this corresponds nicely to the statement of verse 3 regarding the virtual identity of man and woman. Sure, in the creation narrative of Genesis 2, woman comes from man—and this has just as much theological significance as the observation Paul pairs it with, that man “comes through woman.” (Perhaps we may even hear the subtext of the incarnation in this Pauline point: even as Jesus Christ our Lord came through a woman.) Moreover, the concluding “all things come from God” is the answer to the misunderstanding that attributes God as the source of man and man as the source of woman; in stating categorically that “all things come from God,” the order of creation as the basis for a hierarchically ordered status, excluding women from the full share of the *imago Dei* that men possess, is forcefully negated by Paul.

In two verses, Paul reduces the basis of the creation-order argument for the inferiority of women, and therefore the theological necessity of head coverings, to rubble. The theological argument for the derivative nature and inferior status of women is based on a reading of the creation narrative in which God the Creator creates the male, but is distanced from the female by the interposition of the male as source of the female.

7. Padgett, “Paul on Women in the Church,” 78.

8. BeDuhn suggests that this refers to woman having authority over her own head, rather than as a sign of an external spiritual authority (““Because of the Angels,”” 302). Morna Hooker suggests that this indicates that woman—like man—exists under the authority of God (“Authority on Her Head: An Examination of 1 Cor 11:10,” *New Testament Studies* 10 [1964]: 410-16).

9. The final phrase of verse 10, “because of the angels,” has confused many a biblical interpreter (see the summary of opinions in Osburn, *Women in the Church*, 184-86). The most plausible proposal is that this as an allusion to the participation of angels in the act of creation, and therefore a part of the argument from the creation order. See BeDuhn, ““Because of the Angels,”” 295-320; Stuckenbruck, “Why Should Women Cover Their Heads,” 205-34.

10. Engberg-Pedersen, “1 Corinthians 11:16,” 683.

This misreading of the Genesis creation narrative is corrected by Paul by an alternative interpretation in the strong theological affirmations of 1 Cor 11.11–12. One might see these verses as a corrective to the theological understanding of creation itself, or one might read them as a corrective establishing a “new creation,” creation “in the Lord.” Either way, it is a clear theological repudiation of the position described in 1 Cor 11.7–9.

True to his style, Paul then turns to the practical question. Now that the theological refutation has been laid out, Paul writes, “Judge for yourselves!” Is it proper for a woman to pray with her head uncovered? Following Paul’s theological reasoning in verses 11 and 12, this has the force of a rhetorical question. For if man and woman are equally essential to the other, and both come from God, then there is no difference in status between a praying and prophesying woman, and a praying and prophesying man.

### *God’s Creation and the Natural Order*

Judith Gundry-Volf notes that presented in this text there are two ways to “read creation” with respect to gender hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> There is the first theological interpretation of creation and nature being promoted by (at least some) Christians in Corinth, in which the chronology of the creation in the narrative of Genesis 2 indicates a set and divinely ordained “natural order” that implies the valuation of men over women. This hierarchical “natural order” is in turn taken as warrant for a hierarchical spiritual order, expressed in verses 8–10 in the exclusion of woman from the *imago Dei*, and therefore requiring specific social markers (head coverings) indicating the categorical spiritual inferiority of woman to man.

There is also the countering theological “read” of creation, which emphasizes, not order, but God’s central role as Creator of all. This places divine agency and character at the center of creation theology, and implies that the only relevant distinction to be made is that of Creator and creature. The affirmation that “all things come from God” is a direct answer to verse 8, thereby including the participation of women in the *imago Dei*—and on exactly the same basis in which men participate in it.

Interpreting verses 11 and 12 as a repudiation of the preceding creation and nature theology, of course, leaves one with a rather large problem in verses 14–16. The thoroughness with which Paul negates the natural order argument summarized at the beginning of the passage makes verse 14 all the more puzzling. With a jolt, the text returns to an explicit appeal to the authority of “nature itself.” After Paul’s resounding statement that “all things come from God,” effectively trumping “the natural order” with the authority of God, this lapse into appealing to Nature’s authority comes as a complete theological reversal. And as such, we as interpreters of this text must ask ourselves, how can we best understand this reversal, in light of the preceding theological claims?

Certainly it is irresponsible for any interpreter to choose 11–13 and ignore 14–16, or to read through 11–13 as if they hold no weight and choose 14–16 as the conclusion of Paul’s argument. We as interpreters must acknowledge the fact of our choice and the problematic aspects of it—no matter which choice we make here. And there are, indeed, many choices to make in the task of making sense of this text.

If one takes the validity of natural order reasoning for granted, one must still decide whether or not this natural order, instituted in creation, is authoritative for Christian doctrine and social practice. 1 Corinthians 11 seems to claim both that it is not (verses 11–12) and that it is (verse 14), without overtly reconciling its internal contradictions. This leaves the biblical reader in the uncomfortable position of making an interpretive choice at a fork in the theological road with no textual signpost to clearly point the way. Such choices are inevitably made on grounds other than the text; tradition, reason, and experience play their roles, even (perhaps especially) when unacknowledged.

11. Judith M. Gundry-Volf, “Gender and Creation in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16: A Study in Paul’s Theological Method,” in *Evangelium, Schriftauslegung, Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 170.

So among those who accept natural order reasoning there are those who, like the Christians in Corinth Paul is addressing, consider this natural order to be permanent and to persist from creation into new creation; while others consider this natural order to be a part of creation that is then transformed by new creation “in the Lord” into a different (generally more egalitarian) order. Among the latter there is yet another choice, that between a spiritualized interpretation which has no social or ethical implications for the here and now, and a more immediate and inclusive interpretation which holds specific social and ethical implications for relationships between men and women, within the church as well as outside of it.

The above sums up the dialectical situation within the Churches of Christ today. Each of the above interpretive stances has been advocated. I would, however, suggest that 1 Corinthians 11.2–16, despite its unresolved tension and ambiguity, offers a sign that the natural order argument is itself suspect and need not be accepted as theologically valid. Verses 11 and 12 give a clear theological alternative to natural order way of thinking. Man is as dependent on woman as she is on him; both are essential to the other. This mutual interdependency is likened to the parallel of that of Christ and God in verse 3, that is, a virtual identification of one with the other.

It is here at this interpretive crossroads that the underlying issue of competing theological authorities becomes most crucial. Theologically, I find it significant that the authority appealed to explicitly in verse 14 is “Nature herself” and not God, or Christ, or the gospel, or even Paul’s occasional authoritative “I.” This appeal to “Nature herself” as authoritative is followed by an appeal to cultural practice.<sup>12</sup> The juxtaposition of nature and culture is telling, because ideas of Nature are always culturally constructed. This appeal to “Nature herself” then is really a cultural appeal in disguise, one that is repeated in the next verse. Such appeals are tied to a specific cultural context—one which we do not necessarily share. The question facing us as interpreters, then, is what does this cultural appeal with regard to this specific practice have to do with our own practices today? And further, of the theological positions staked out in this text, which contains the enduring message of the gospel? Which position does Paul commend the Corinthians (and by extension us, or anyone) for holding on to, as “that which was handed down?”

Who is it that we follow? Are we followers of “Nature herself,” or the triune Creator God, by whom all things were made? This question is really the crucial one. Nature functions in this text as a competing moral authority alongside that of God as Creator and God’s new creation in Christ. To make the theological claim that all things come from God is not to validate Nature as authoritative, but the opposite: it is to refute Nature. Not Nature, but Creation; yea, not simply Creation, but Creation and New Creation.

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12. See Engberg-Pedersen, “1 Corinthians 11:16,” 683-84.