

133. Women in the Church Family (1 Cor. 7; 1 Cor. 11)

Study Guide

Overview

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One of the problems faced by the early church was understanding the new role of women. It may be hard to grasp, but Paul's teaching stimulated one of the first "Women's Lib" movements! In Christ, possessing spiritual gifts, each woman could view herself as an individual of great personal worth and value.

The impact of this discovery, and the struggle to understand the implications of lifting women up to stand beside men, rather than crouching in their shadow, is reflected in questions posed for Paul to answer.

One of the questions had to do with divorce. In [1 Cor. 7](#) Paul dealt with this issue, raised primarily by women who were seeking emancipation by questioning their traditional role as wives. In [1 Cor. 11](#), Paul spoke to first-century Christian women who campaigned for the right to attend public worship with uncovered heads, to symbolize their equality with men. Some of these even disrupted the meetings by noisily challenging those who taught.

It is striking how many of the contemporary cries of women in our society are reflected in these passages.

In Paul's handling of these issues here, we are helped to see God's unique answer; an answer which affirms the full personhood and full participation of women in the body of Christ, and yet gently guides us away from drawing false conclusions about what full personhood means.

Commentary

It is important first to notice that the Bible takes a consistent stand in its basic attitude toward women. [Genesis 1](#) affirmed the full personhood of Eve, and her full participation in God's image as that image is stamped on humankind. Eve also shared fully in the "dominion" which God intended mankind to exercise over creation.

So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female He created them. God . . . said to them, "Be fruitful . . . and subdue."

[Genesis 1:27-28](#)

With sin, a new necessity was imposed on the race. Woman was forced into a subordinate place, just as later the destructive nature of man's sinful impulses forced the imposition of government on society (cf. [Genesis 3:16](#); [Genesis 9:6](#) with [Romans 13:1-4](#)). This subordination implies no demeaning of women. It made a wife no less important than her husband as a person—just as today a mayor, governor, or even President is no more important than a person who is an ordinary citizen. [Romans 13](#) insists that the ruler's role is in fact to serve the citizen; and service rather than power is implied in [Genesis 3](#)'s reference to a husband's authority.

But sin has a way of warping all things. Just as governments tend to become tyrannical, so "submission" became a denial of worth, and "authority" became the right to use and discard. The divine order, rather than upholding the worth of women, has actually been accused of denying it!

In Old Testament times, most cultures viewed women as chattels; they were denied rights commonly granted to men, and could be treated any way their husbands or owners pleased. It is probably difficult to grasp now, but the Old Testament's laws relating to women were significantly more liberal and supportive of women's rights than those in the rest of the world. Not that the Old Testament laws reflect the full restoration of women. Many Old Testament laws do *not* reflect God's ideal. They are accommodations to man's "hardness of heart," as Jesus pointed out in [Matthew 19:8](#). Law itself does not present the standard of perfection, but represents an accommodation 864to the capacity of men to respond.

Yet, even in the Old Testament, there were indications that God would one day act to reaffirm woman's position *beside*, and not beneath, men.

With Christ, those promised days came! One of the most dramatic transformations was in men's attitude toward women, and in women's understanding of themselves. We see it so often throughout the Word.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

[Galatians 3:28](#)

The old ways of valuing and classifying people are no longer valid! In Christ, we are members of one body.

I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy.

[Acts 2:17](#)

Since the Spirit's coming at Pentecost, *every* member of the body has been given a gift, and called to minister. Even the gift of prophecy, which Paul identified as very important (see [1 Cor. 12:27-30](#)), is shared by women!

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchrea. . . . She has been a great help to many people, including me.

[Romans 16:1](#)

Paul not only valued women, but he recognized them as eligible to hold office in the church. In the same context he called Priscilla and Aquila "my fellow workers in Christ" ([Romans 16:3](#)).

It is difficult to see how some accuse Paul of a narrow, Pharisaic attitude toward women, or insist that the New Testament documents maintain a degrading, culture-bound view of the place of women in marriage and in the church. *It was exactly because the early church rejected society's view of women that the Corinthian problem arose!* Paul's guidelines here are not designed to put women "back in their place," but rather to help newly liberated women find their identity as persons of worth and value . . . and to help men, stunned by this sudden recognition of women as God's ministers in the body of Christ, to explore the implications of the new relationship.

● **Link to Life 1: Youth / Adult**

Divide your group into two teams by sex, one with all men and the other with all women. Ask each team to vote first on whether the "women's lib" movement is a good or bad thing. Then ask each team to list answers to two questions: "What is valid about the movement? What is wrong about the movement?"

Do not hear reports at this time, but ask the two teams to keep their lists for later discussion.

Then give a minilecture covering some of the highlights on the Bible's view of women, as discussed in the commentary. It is against this background we must study the Corinthian and other New Testament passages relating to women.

Women in the Church: 1 Cor. 11

The subjects taken up in this chapter ([1 Cor. 11](#)) all have to do with public worship. The first subject focuses on several practices of the Christian women's liberation party. The second topic is the practice of the Lord's Supper. It is the first subject we want to concentrate on.

Paul began by praising the believers—including the women—for holding to his previous teachings ([1 Cor. 11:2](#)). Paul then went on to answer some who had challenged his teaching.

Again we need to understand the cultural background before looking at the passage itself. What really is at issue is the Corinthian women's desire to dispense with the veil (to go "uncovered") in public worship.

The veil covering

Sir William Anderson gives us some insight into the cultural implications of the veil:

In Oriental lands the veil is the power and the honor and the dignity of the woman. With the veil on her head she can go anywhere in security and profound respect. She is not seen; it is a mark of thoroughly bad manners to observe a veiled woman on the streets. She is alone. The rest of the people around her are nonexistent to her, and she is to them. She is supreme in the crowd. . . . But without the veil the woman is a thing of nought, whom any man may insult. . . . A woman's authority and dignity vanish along with the all-covering veil that she discards (cited by Robertson and Plummer in *Corinthians One, International Critical Commentary*, p. 311).

Anderson's point is simple. The veil served to *affirm the woman's dignity as a woman*.

Why did the Corinthian ladies want to remove their veils in church meetings? Because they felt a need to symbolize their new status as full participants in the body of Christ. If they were equals of men, they wanted to be like men and to worship unveiled!

Paul's response is not a put-down. Instead, it is a reaffirmation of the fact that a woman can be valuable and worthwhile *as a woman*. No woman needs to seek liberation by struggling to become like man!

An inappropriate symbol

It is significant here that Paul does not argue, as he might have, from the cultural implications of going unveiled. In that society, the discreet matron would demonstrate her propriety in the way she dressed, while the *heterai* "available for hire") would advertise herself by her dress. Surely Paul could have taken the approach of shaming the Corinthian women for acting like harlots.

But Paul did not. Instead, he affirmed these women. He argued that there *are* differences between men and women, and that it is no disgrace to recognize the differences. Acting in ways appropriate for a woman to act in no way denies the Christian woman's worth and value, and it in no way threatens her participation in the body of Christ.

An unnecessary demand

In [1 Cor. 11:2-16](#) Paul explained that there *are* differences between men and women that are to be acknowledged. But the differences are designed to make men and women *interdependent*, not to make one sex of lesser importance.

Paul's argument here is a theological one, finding its roots in the order of Creation. The man does have a certain priority; he was created first, and woman was shaped from his flesh. Eve was created to meet Adam's need for companionship rather than vice versa. This order in Creation is reflected in the relationship between a man and his wife. He is the "head" of the woman, even as Christ is the Head of man.

Usually it is at this point that the modern person rebels. "Head" to most of us means "power," and in our day that connotes suppression and oppression. But note that this is not the way Paul viewed it here. Man is the "image and glory" of God ([1 Cor. 11:7](#)). *Rather than indicating oppression by God, the Lord's headship over man implies an exaltation of man!*

So too with the woman. Man's headship over the woman does not imply subservience, but instead the lifting up of the woman. Headship does not proclaim the rights of men to enslave. Just the opposite. It insists that men should recognize the high value God places on woman not only as fully a person, but as man's "glory"! Thus, in wearing a veil (that "sign of authority"), the Corinthian women would be displaying for men and angels as well, the stunning fact that *in Christ it is no shame to be female!* Each time women participated *as women* in the ministry of the church, they would show again the value, worth, and glory of womankind.

In [1 Cor. 11:11-16](#) Paul did make a cultural appeal. At that time long hair *was* womanly, and men would be ashamed to let their hair grow long. Would a woman ever think of shaving her head and appearing in public without her hair? Of course not! Why? She'd be ashamed. Somehow, without long hair, she would be denying her femininity.

So, Paul said, it really isn't proper to appear in church and pray unveiled either. For this too is a denial of femininity. A woman would be denying herself—not finding herself—by attempting to become like a man.

Echoes

It is here that we find echoes of the principle Paul stated in [1 Cor. 7](#). We find fulfillment in being who and what we are.

God is sovereign.

He has assigned each of us our place. He has called us to live in that place. This is the message that echoes from those first-century days to our own. In tones of love, the great apostle reminded women who were breaking out of old, distorted images and shaking off feelings of worthlessness and unimportance that it was not necessary to deny their womanhood to find their new identities. Rather, they would find fulfillment in accepting themselves as women, and glorying in that fact. For a woman *is* important, not in spite of being a woman, but *as* one.

There are other passages in the New Testament relating to women in the church. Some of them are more difficult to understand than these two in Corinthians. But if we keep in mind the cultural background, and the argument developed by Paul in this particular chapter, we can understand better the point Paul makes.

In [1 Cor. 14:33-36](#), on disorder in the congregational meeting, Paul is not telling women to "stifle yourselves." He is warning some of the more aggressive of the women's libbers to stop shouting and interrupting with their argumentative questions. They should instead talk things over with their husbands at home, and in the process learn a submission that is appropriate for them as wives.

Tim. [2:11-15](#) does not teach that women cannot exercise their spiritual gifts when the body meets. We know that women can, and are to ([Acts 2:17](#); [1 Cor. 12:7](#); [1 Cor. 14:26](#)). Instead the passage has a more narrow focus, on the role of a ruling elder. To "teach" ([1 Tim. 2:12](#)), as

defined "with authority" is an elder's function. This particular function in the body of Christ—and only this function!—is reserved for men.

How important that today, we like Paul affirm believing women, and lift them up to become full participants as partners in our homes, and as ministering persons in Christ's church.

Teaching Guide

Prepare

How are women affirmed as ministering people in your own local congregation? Is this an area in which your group members need to grow?

Explore

1. Begin with a minilecture overview of biblical and cultural background to Paul's teaching on women in 1 Corinthians.
2. Or break into male and female teams to discuss the pros and cons of modern women's lib. See "Link to Life 1". Follow this up with biblical and cultural background.

Expand

1. Study [1 Cor. 7](#), using the "letters to Paul" approach suggested in "Link to Life 2". Have teams respond to typical Corinthians whose questions the apostle dealt with in this important New Testament chapter.
2. In a minilecture explain the issue behind Paul's instruction in [1 Cor. 11](#), and show how he answered it. You may wish to comment also on [1 Cor. 14:33-36](#) and [1 Tim. 2:11-15](#).

Apply

1. You may want to now hear reports from the teams of men and women who listed pros and cons of modern women's lib. In view of what your group has discovered in these Corinthian passages, how might items on the lists be reevaluated?
2. Ask the women in your group to serve as a panel, and discuss: "Is our church affirming us and our importance as full members of the body of Christ?"