

Analysis of 1 Corinthians 14:34-37 and 11:2-16

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Some churches have used 1 Corinthians 14:34-37 to insist that women should not be allowed to speak in church. Others have used 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 to insist that women must wear a head-covering in church. In this brief article, we will look at an alternative way of viewing these passages. This alternative reflects my personal understanding of these passages, and readers are encouraged to all investigate the matter and draw their own conclusions.

1 Corinthians 14:34-37

Let's start by looking at 1 Corinthians 14:34-37.

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 inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

³⁶Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? ³⁷If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.
(1 Corinthians 14:34-37 NIV)

At first glance, these verses may indeed appear to forbid women from speaking in church. However, upon closer analysis, I do not believe that this is what Paul is saying at all. This verse is found in the book of 1 Corinthians. There are several instances in 1 Corinthians where Paul will quote something that the Corinthians have said, and then reply to that quote with the truth. It must be remembered that in the original Greek there are no quotation marks, and so their presence in our English translations is at the translators' discretion. We will now look at some examples in 1 Corinthians where Paul quotes the Corinthians, and then states his response. In the following verses, the underlined text is Paul quoting the Corinthians (i.e. it is not Paul's own words, but the Corinthians). He then follows the quote by responding to it with the truth:

¹²"Everything is permissible for me"—but not everything is beneficial.
"Everything is permissible for me"—but I will not be mastered by anything.
¹³"Food for the stomach and the stomach for food"—but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.
(1 Corinthians 6:12-13 NIV)

In verse 12, Paul responds to the Corinthians' claim that everything is permissible, by reminding them that not everything is beneficial, and that by saying that he will not be mastered by anything. In verse 13, Paul responds to the Corinthians' claim about the stomach and food by reminding them that God will destroy them both. Here is another example where Paul quotes something that the Corinthians have said, and

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then replies to that quote with the truth. Again, the underlined text is Paul quoting the Corinthians (i.e. it is not Paul's own words, but the Corinthians). He then follows the quote by responding to it with the truth:

¹ Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me:
It is good for a man not to touch a woman. ² Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.
(1 Corinthians 7:1-2 NKJV)

Some of the Corinthians were claiming, "it is good for a man not to touch a woman". The Corinthians were very interested in Greek philosophy. Some of the philosophers (the "stoic philosophers") expressed disdain for sexual pleasure, and warned that love for a woman and sexual interests distract a man from the higher pursuit of wisdom. For example, one first century stoic philosopher said:

"A wise man ought to love his wife with judgement, not affection... Let them show themselves to their wives not as lovers, but as husbands"¹

This kind of philosophy seemed to have grabbed hold of some of the Corinthians. However, Paul responded to them by saying "Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband." In other words: it would be better for you to enjoy sexual intimacy within marriage than to burn with lust and fall into sin because of unnecessary abstinence.

In a similar way, in 1 Corinthians 14:34-37, verse 34-35 are Paul quoting the Corinthians. Verses 36 and 37 are Paul responding with the truth to the Corinthians' error. Again, in the following, the underlined text is Paul quoting the Corinthians (i.e. it is not Paul's own words, but the Corinthians). He then follows the quote by responding to it with the truth:

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 inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.
³⁶Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? ³⁷If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.
(1 Corinthians 14:34-37 NIV)

In verse 36, "Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?" is Paul rebuking the Corinthians for their wrong teaching which is quoted in verses 34-35. The Corinthians were saying that women should not be allowed to speak in church, and that if they were going to learn, they would have to ask their husbands at home. What was their justification for this? The Corinthians said, "as the Law says" (verse 34). The law they were referring to was not the Law of Moses, which says nothing of the sort. Rather, it seems they were referring to the Jewish Oral Law, which forbade women from speaking in the synagogue. It would appear that some of the Corinthians were trying to introduce this law to the church services. However, the Jewish Oral Law was not part of the Bible and Paul was

¹ Bristow, John Temple, *What Paul Really Said About Women*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991) page 100

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making sure that it didn't enter the church. Therefore, in rebuking the Corinthians, Paul reminds these Corinthian men that the word of God did not originate with them, and that they are not the only people it has reached, and therefore they have no right to introduce such customs. In verse 37, Paul tells them that if they think they are prophets or spiritual, then they should acknowledge that what he is writing is God's command (and not what they are saying).

In summary, Paul did not ban women from speaking in church – some of the Corinthians did. Paul quoted them (v34-35), and then rebuked them for doing so (v36-37).

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Let us now look at 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, which has been used by some to insist that women must wear a head-covering in church. I have taken the liberty of underlining the verses which I believe are Paul quoting the Corinthians (i.e. it is not Paul's own words, but the Corinthians), after which he replies with his correction:

² Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered *them* to you.

³ But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman *is* man, and the head of Christ *is* God.

⁴ Every man praying or prophesying, having *his* head covered, dishonors his head. ⁵ But every woman who prays or prophesies with *her* head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved.

⁶ For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. ⁷ For a man indeed 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 is not from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. ¹⁰ For this reason the woman ought to have a *symbol of authority* on *her* head, because of the angels.

¹¹ Nevertheless, neither *is* man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. ¹² For as woman *came* from man, even so man also *comes* through woman; but all things are from God.

¹³ Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? ¹⁵ But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for *her* hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶ But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor *do* the churches of God.

(1 Corinthians 11:3-16 NKJV)

Paul begins in verse 2 by commending the Corinthians for keeping the traditions that he delivered to them and reminds them of the headship of Christ, man, and God. However, it appears that this issue of headship had been misinterpreted by the Corinthians to mean that women should therefore cover their heads. Paul quotes this misinterpretation in verses 4-10. It seems that because the men were the visible 'heads' in the church ("the head of woman is man" (v3)), the Corinthians interpreted this to mean that women should cover their heads, so that only the heads of men were seen in church (vs. 4-10). In other words, when a woman is ministering

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(“praying or prophesying”), the Corinthians were saying that their heads should not be seen, because the head of woman is man! Paul quotes this erroneous interpretation of male headship in verses 4-10 (underlined).

So, verses 4-10 are not Paul’s view, but the view of the Corinthians who he is quoting. They were saying that that if a woman didn’t cover her head, she may as well shave her hair off (v6). The Corinthians also maintained that women ought to cover their heads because whilst men are the glory of God, women are the glory of men; and that woman was taken from man (not the other way round); and that woman was created for man (and not the other way round) – “man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man”. Therefore, they said that because of this, women had to wear a head covering, and evidently the angels had something to do with this – “because of the angels” (v10).

However, in verses 11-16, Paul responds to this misapplication by reminding the Corinthians that in the Lord, men and women are not independent of each other, and that even as woman came from man, man also comes from woman whenever he is born! - “Nevertheless, neither *is* man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman *came* from man, even so man also *comes* through woman; but all things are from God.” In verse 13-14 Paul encourages the Corinthians to think the matter through (“Judge among yourselves...”), and in verse 15, in order to prove that the head-covering custom they have introduced is not necessary, Paul reasons that a woman’s hair is long enough to be a head-covering anyway! (“...*her* hair is given to her for a covering”). He concludes in verse 16 by telling them that neither the apostles nor any other church practiced this head-covering custom:

¹⁶ But if anyone seems to be contentious, **we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.**
(1 Corinthians 11:16 NKJV, emphasis added)

In summary, Paul did not insist that women should wear head-coverings – the Corinthians did. Paul quoted them (v4-10), and then corrected their wrong practice (v11-16), reminding them that neither the apostles nor any other church had such a practice.

The reader may also wish to read my article on 1 Timothy 2:12-15, which is another Pauline passage about women which I believe has been misapplied. You can read it by clicking on the following link:

<http://www.stuartpattico.com/timothywomen.htm>

Whilst we are looking at this 1 Corinthians 11, we may as well look at verses 14-15, which have been interpreted to suggest that men should not have long hair:

¹⁴ Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? ¹⁵ But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for *her* hair is given to her for a covering.
(1 Corinthians 11:14-15 NKJV)

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Is Paul really saying that men should not have long hair? Notice that in verse 15, there is no question mark, whilst there is a question mark at the end of verse 14. Let's now look at these verses in the NIV translation:

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.
(1 Corinthians 11:13-15 NIV)

Notice that in the NIV, there is no question mark in verse 14, but there is one in verse 15. This is different than the NKJV which had the question mark in verse 14. This difference is due to the fact that in the original Greek, there are no question marks, and so the translators have to decide whether or not it is a question or a statement. Let's look again at verses 14-15 in the NKJV:

¹⁴ Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? ¹⁵ But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for *her* hair is given to her for a covering.
(1 Corinthians 11:14 NKJV)

If verse 14 is a question, let's answer it. Does nature teach us that long hair is a dishonour to a man? To be honest, I don't think it does - nature does not teach us about men having long hair. I don't see that nature teaches that, as usually, a man's hair will grow just as long as a woman's hair if left uncut. So, if verse 14 is a question, the answer is "no". However, there are some who believe verse 14 is not a question at all, and should be translated as follows:

Nature itself does not even teach you that if a man has long hair it is a dishonor to him. ¹⁵ But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for *her* hair is given to her for a covering.
(1 Corinthians 11:14-15, alternative translation)

I think this may very well be right (a statement, not a question). So, in my understanding, Paul is making this statement to show that the Corinthian claim that men should not cover their head ("Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered dishonours his head" (v4)) has no foundation, not even in nature (as nature does not prevent man's hair from growing long and covering his head!). On the other hand (v15) nature also does not prevent women from having long hair, and so if the Corinthian's insist on having a head-covering for the women, the women's hair is good enough by itself as a covering! ("But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering." (v15)) Even so, let us remind ourselves again that Paul concludes in verse 16 by telling them that neither the apostles nor any other church practiced a head-covering custom:

¹⁶ But if anyone seems to be contentious, **we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.**
(1 Corinthians 11:16 NKJV, emphasis added)

So, Paul did not insist that women should wear head-coverings – the Corinthians did. Paul quoted them (v4-10), and then corrected their wrong practice (v11-16), reminding them that neither the apostles nor any other church had such a practice.

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