

A woman's place is ...? 1 Corinthians 10.31— 11.10.



Two Roman ladies from the museum in Athens. I wonder what they would have made of Paul's letter? Here is Anna's comment on one of Paul's most controversial passages ...

This is one of the hardest passages of scripture to understand! So say N.T Wright and many other respected scholars and if they can't agree on what Paul is saying or why he is saying it then I have no chance!

I also have no chance because, I have to admit that though I have read this passage before, many times, and occasionally wondered what it all means I have mostly glossed over it because on the surface I don't think I like what Paul might be saying.

“Christ is head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ” (V3) verses like that give me an icky feeling because they have been used in the past to justify excluding women from decision making, leadership, or from having a voice at all and in some circles are still used to exclude women today.

The passage seems to be reinforcing gender differences in worship using the symbol of head coverings to keep women as women and men as men. And Paul's

justification for this has something to do with the creation story, that men were made first in the image and reflection of God and women were made for the sake of man.

The difficulty with the passage is that, if that is the message, it contradicts Paul's message and actions in other places. Paul throughout his journeys written about in Acts and in his teachings has allowed, promoted, and accepted women in authority and leadership — like Phoebe, the deacon of the church in Cenchreae which was actually part of the Corinthian church (Romans 16.1-2). Paul was very positive about Phoebe's ministry and describes her as his "benefactor" or "patron". He was pretty revolutionary for his time. Even in this passage, he says "but any women who prays or prophesies..."(v.5) — he is expecting women to have spiritual gifts and to use them in public worship. Why then is he suddenly insisting in these differences?

Another difficulty is that we only have half the conversation. Paul is writing this in reply to problems the church in Corinth is experiencing but we are not sure what that problem actually was. Some scholars have speculated that the women in the church were abusing their newfound freedom in Christ and were behaving in ways that were disgracing their husbands and the gospel and Paul wanted to put a stop to it. Others speculate that the issue was that the only women in Corinth who didn't cover their heads were prostitutes and though Christian women were free not to follow the social convention of covering their head it was giving the church a bad name among the people of the city. Others speculate that it was just another example of Jewish and Greek customs clashing within the church.

The positive of all these speculations is that they all revolve around cultural issues specific to Corinth at the time of writing and have nothing to do with us today. We can happily ignore Paul's instructions about head coverings for women — I am particularly happy about that because I really don't like hats!

Another reading of the passage is that because the theology is so alien to Paul's other theology he must be explaining the position of others who he is disagreeing with. Saying if you believe there is a hierarchical relationship between men and women in the church then you must also believe these weird ideas about creation and hair.

The problem with that is that they are only speculations. We don't know that Paul doesn't have a deeper theological issue that is relevant to us that we are just not understanding. And for that reason, people keep looking and digging at this passage. Maybe there's a clue in vs 11&13 "In the Lord, however, woman is not

independent of man, or man independent of woman ...and judge for yourselves if it is proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?”.

Whatever reading of the passage you prefer it will remain a controversial passage and should teach us the importance of not taking a passage out of context and reading it on its own and coming to any conclusions that exclude others.

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