

Corinthians

Lessons 20–21

Men and Women in Worship

The situation at Corinth

Due to the nature of the Corinthian correspondence we do not know precisely what prompted Paul to write what he did with regard to men and women in worship. Here is what we clearly know from the text:

- There is an ordering of creation.
- The Corinthians were blurring this order, including distinctions between the sexes.
- This issue is linked to the natural and the supernatural worlds.
- The primary concern appears to be what is happening in public worship services, although it includes private devotion.
- The issue seems to be more directly connected to women than to men.
- Paul links the issue to the created order, nature, the angelic realm, and church tradition to make his case.

The situation is clearly linked to a blurring of the natural distinctions between male and female, and Paul indicates that this is not appropriate. The blurring of gender distinctives could be related to some of the other situations previously discussed. If indeed there were “eschatological women” who felt that since they were now in Christ that they were like the angels in heaven and not subject to marriage, they also may have felt that any gender distinctives were unnecessary. Since they were in Christ, they perhaps felt as if they were not subject to the natural order of things.

The covering of hair

Some have suggested that what Paul means by “covering” is a shawl or scarf. This, however, does not seem to be the case at all. This would only make sense if women were refusing to wear shawls that were customarily *required* of women in their culture. Likewise, the implication would be that the men were wearing the shawls instead. There is no cultural support for wearing such shawls by either men or women.

Paul states clearly what he means by covering: “Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering” (vv. 14-15).

In a footnote, the NIV offers the following translation of verses 4-7

“Every man who prays or prophesies with long hair dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with no covering of hair on her head dishonors her head—she is just like one of the ‘shorn women.’ If a woman has no covering, let her be for now with short hair, but since it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair shorn or shaved, she should grow it again. A man ought not to have long hair.”

Paul makes his appeal for men to have noticeably short hair and for women to have uncut hair by appealing to the created order, nature, the angelic realm, and church tradition. Nowhere else in Scripture are all four of these authorities appealed to. This is indicative of the seriousness of the God-given distinctions between male and female.

Blurring Gender Distinctives

"But some women either were actually praying/prophesying (most likely), or were arguing for the right to do so, without the customary 'head covering' or 'hairstyle.' Probably this is related to their being pneumatikos ('spiritual') and to their somewhat overrealized eschatology. It seems difficult to understand Paul's answer unless their spiritualized eschatology also involved some kind of breakdown in the distinction between the sexes. Already they had arrived in the Spirit; they were already citing as those who would be 'like the angels,' among whom sexual distinctions no longer existed. As a part of their new 'spirituality' they were disregarding some very customary distinctions between the sexes that would otherwise have been regarded as disgraceful. Paul feels strongly enough about the issue to speak to it, even if his argument lacks its customary vigor. Since it is difficult to imagine Paul caring for 'custom' per se, especially following 10:23-11:1, it is probably the larger theological issue that leads him to this answer at all."

Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 498.