



“Freedom on your head” (1 Corinthians 11:2–16): A Paradigm for the Structure of Paul’s Ethics

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VEILING OF WOMEN: A TIMELESS ISSUE

The accelerating globalization that has come through communication and migration, through economic and political interconnectedness, has led to tensions among peoples with differing cultural and religious values. The resurgence and spread of Islam has led to heated debate and even violence over the extent to which the norms and practices of the Muslim tradition are implemented among Islamic peoples and integrated into Western secular societies. That conflict has found a focus in the issue of the veiling of women.

The conflict over the veiling of women is not new. It was a flashpoint for heated debate in the Christian church of the first century. Women belonging to the newly formed congregation in the city of Corinth, brought together by Paul, wanted to dispense with the wearing of veils. What did Paul, the church’s first missionary, have to say about setting aside this custom?

The manner in which Paul addresses the issue is significant. He writes in a let-

*Can freedom in Christ be taken too far? For Paul, freedom in Christ means being set free **from** restraints of the law, but, more than that, freedom in Christ means being set free **for** someone else. Within these parameters, Paul addresses the troublesome matter of the veiling of women.*

ter to the women of that congregation (1 Cor 11: 2–16), that, for a variety of reasons, they should continue to wear their veils. Most of the reasons mentioned have as their origin not Paul, but a variety of sources, and they are of debatable importance. Their significance, however, is dependent upon that to which Paul connects them, which he considers essential and normative for Christians. And what he considers essential and normative is instructive not only for first-century but also twenty-first-century Christians.

Many recent biblical commentators have not been helpful in understanding what Paul is doing. They view Paul as a man of his times, burdened with cultural baggage. Norman Perrin finds Paul “ill at ease...in questions concerning women.”¹ Robin Scroggs says “this is hardly one of Paul’s happier compositions. The logic is obscure at best and contradictory at worst. The word choice is peculiar; the tone, peevish.”² J. L. Houlden concludes that Paul might just “rationalize his prejudices.”³ Jack Sanders sees Paul advocating an “inconsistent” morality that ought to be rejected.⁴

THE REAL ISSUE: FREEDOM IN CHRIST

The issue at stake for Paul is more than the matter of the veiling of women. The real issue is the message he had delivered to those women and their congregation. Paul came to Corinth preaching the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 2:2; 15:3–8). They understood this to mean that with Christ’s death and resurrection, they, too, had experienced a death and resurrection. It was a transformative spiritual experience. They had achieved a new spiritual status—death to an old life and freedom to live a new life. This was a message they embraced enthusiastically, for which Paul commended them (1 Cor 11:2).

But they took this freedom to mean that they had been set free from all restraints: free to eat meat dedicated to idols (8:1–13); free to have sexual relations with prostitutes (6:15); free to have sexual relations with a father’s wife (5:1); women set free to speak at divine worship (14:34); and women set free from the wearing of veils (11:2–16). There were no limits.

This was a serious and dangerous distortion of the message Paul delivered. They had the right concept but the wrong conclusions. They did enjoy a new spiritual status and had received a marvelous new freedom in Christ, but they made misguided applications.

Of concern to Paul is the deeper meaning of the freedom that comes with Christ. For certain, freedom in Christ entails the matter of being set free *from* restraints, such as a veil. It is that, but more than that—freedom in Christ entails pri-

¹Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974) 103.

²Robin Scroggs, “Paul and the Eschatological Woman,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40 (1972) 297.

³James L. Houlden, *Ethics and the New Testament* (London: Penguin, 1973) 34.

⁴Jack Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament: Change and Development* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 66.

marily being set free *for* someone. Freedom in Christ is to be understood within the context of relationships—with others and oneself. A follower of Christ considers, before anything else, the effects his or her actions will have upon others and oneself. Everything done by a follower of Christ is to be guided by what is helpful in those relationships.

Listen to Paul: “All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are beneficial” (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23). “Am I not free?” (9:1) “Do we not have the right...?” (9:4). “But I have made no use of any of these rights” (9:15). “For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win more of them” (9:19). “[W]e endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ” (9:12). “I do it all for the sake of the gospel” (9:23).

With this understanding, Paul calls upon the Christian women of Corinth to look carefully at their words and actions to discern whether they help or hinder their relationships with others and themselves in the proclamation of Christ and the mission of the church. Paul exhorts all who belong to the congregation in Corinth to do as he does: “Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved” (10:31–32).

Paul does not pull together these norms and customs in order to provide an instruction manual on Christian virtues and vices. He wants, instead, to talk about the deeper meaning of freedom in Christ.

Paul summons the Christian women of Corinth to a new understanding: “But I want you to understand,” he tells them (11:3). This new understanding enlists into the service of the church’s mission in the proclamation of Christ, among other things, a mix of prevailing views and values of first-century Corinth. Paul mentions various moral scruples and cultural traditions of the surrounding community that are considered normative for life. He lists matters that are proper (11:13), that dishonor (11:4 RSV), and that disgrace (11:6). He talks about creation (11:9) and the origins of life. He talks about what nature teaches (11:14) and the design of life. With the use of the word “head” (11:3), he talks about a line of authority considered elemental to the order of life.

Paul does not pull together these norms and customs in order to provide an instruction manual on Christian virtues and vices. He does not advocate a step-by-step program of Christian ethics. He wants, instead, to talk about the deeper meaning of freedom in Christ and employs these various norms and traditions, as well as other matters, in pursuit of his purpose.

Paul says to the women of the Corinthian congregation that, first of all, they need to recognize they have been set free in Christ *for their neighbors*, and, as such,

they need to take into account what is valued by their neighbors. Otherwise, how can their neighbors believe what is said about Christ? If these Christian women cannot even observe basic moral values and traditions, which have the authorization and blessing of the powers of heaven, what good are their words about Christ? What good is the witness of such women who are so fast and loose about life, outrageously violating all that is sacred?

Paul is telling the Christian women of Corinth, consequently, they need to understand that being set free for their neighbors takes precedence over being set free from a veil. Anthony Thiselton states it well when he asks, “Do we sufficiently value the ‘otherness’ of others?”⁵

THE MATTER OF HEADSHIP

Paul proceeds, then, to lift up for consideration, item by item, values and traditions of the day, as well as other matters. Raised for viewing, first, is the matter of “head” (*kephalē*). “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ” (11:3). Three pairs of headship are mentioned—God to Christ, Christ to man, and man to woman.

Paul goes on to mention “head” six more times in 11:3–10, nine times altogether. The fact that head is mentioned nine times in eight short verses—and nowhere else in Paul’s letters—makes clear the significance of headship as the first reason mentioned by Paul for the veiling of women. (“Head” is mentioned eight times in Ephesians and Colossians, but Pauline authorship there is questionable).

As to the meaning of “head” (11:3), three renderings have been generally suggested by Pauline scholars: “head (that is, authority),” “source,” and “foremost.”⁶ Of the three renderings, tradition has argued for “authority,” though Thiselton, following Collins, believes Paul “deliberately uses a *polymorphous concept*, through a word that has *multiple meanings*.”⁷

Paul, however, loads the word’s association with authority with new meaning. He speaks about a line of authority that is not from superior to subordinate, but rather one that has to do with leading in the way of submission and service. Paul writes, “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one” (1 Cor 15:28 RSV; “so that God may be all in all” NRSV). God, in Christ, makes himself subject to everyone, becoming “everything to every one.” Following God’s lead, those who have been set free in Christ make known that they are subject to and servant of all. Service is the motif of the gospel. Servanthood is the soul of all relationships.

⁵Anthony C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 178.

⁶See the discussion by Anthony C. Thiselton in his *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 812–822.

⁷*Ibid.*, 811; see Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999) 396.

WHY THE VEIL?

Paul goes on in 11:4–9 to enlist additional reasons for veiling taken from local norms and traditions. In 11:4–6 he talks about the community's scruples regarding honor and shame with use of the words "dishonor" and "disgrace" (RSV). In 11:7–9 he talks about creation and what makes for the "glory" of woman (RSV). Christians, for the sake of their neighbors, are to show they also take seriously matters such as honor and shame, creation, and the glory of woman.

But then Paul does something unanticipated. He redirects the attention of the Christian women of Corinth from their neighbors to themselves. He wants them to understand that in Christ they have been *set free for themselves*. He sees how preoccupied they are with themselves and their newfound freedom from the veil. Since they are focused upon themselves, he calls upon them to do so even more. In effect, he tells them, "Let's talk about you. You feel you've received a special message from God, brought by an angel, about being set free in Christ from your veils. I see this means everything to you. Take a good look at that. For that reason, as well, you need to wear your veils" (cf. 11:10).

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The word used by Paul in 11:10 for "veil" is significant ("veil" in RSV; "symbol of authority" in NRSV). He uses the word *exousia*—a different term from words used for "veil" in preceding verses. In 11:5, 6, and 7, Paul uses variations of the word *kaluptō*. Why the change in this one instance only?

Exousia, as it appears in the New Testament, is translated regularly as "authority." So that would seem to be a fitting translation to make in 11:10, and that is how it is now most often done. "Authority," however, can be defined in three different senses. The first is the passive sense, as that authority under which women find themselves: under God, under Christ, and under man. The second is the active sense, as that authority women have over their own heads, having been given that authority by God to do things that formerly had not been permitted. The third is in the sense of having the freedom or right to choose.⁸

Paul gives a clue in 1 Cor 9 to which of these three senses he has in mind. He sets the stage in chapter 9 for the many issues addressed in the following chapters: "Do we not have the right (*exousia*) to our food and drink?" (9:4); "Is it only Barnabas and I who have no right (*exousia*) to refrain from working?" (9:6); "Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right (*exousia*)..." (9:12).

⁸See the discussion of these possibilities in David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) 524–526.

In using the word *exousia* in 11:10, Paul, likewise, is rendering “veil” as “right” or “freedom.” Freedom is what *exousia* (“veil”) is about. Paul is telling the Christian women of Corinth: “Wear freedom on your heads.”

FOR THIS REASON

Paul begins 11:10 with the phrase: “For this reason....” Gordon Fee says of this phrase that it is an “inferential conjunction.”⁹ By way of inference, a connection is made. The connection could move in either direction, backward or forward, drawing a conclusion on the basis of what has been said or in anticipation of what will be said.

It would strain the syntax, however, to go backward and connect with something that has been said, such as with “authority” in 11:3. But that’s the connection most often made. “Head” was talked about in 11:3 as “authority.” *Exousia* is translated regularly in 11:10 as “authority.” But to make such a connection misses what Paul is doing here.

Throughout 11:2–16, Paul is stringing together a sequence of distinct matters, mentioning them individually as reasons for wearing the veil. The first mentioned, in 11:3, was that of authority. Then came honor and shame in 11:4–6, the glory of woman in 11:7, and creation in 11:9. A new matter is mentioned in 11:10: angels. Several other matters are mentioned in 11:11–16, including being “in the Lord” in 11:11–12, and the practice of the church in 11:16.

To what, then, should the matter—“For this reason a woman ought to have a veil/freedom on her head” (11:10)—be connected? Reaching forward is the more likely inferential connection. *Exousia*/veil/freedom somehow has to do with “angels.” Otherwise, “because of the angels” would have no meaning or purpose in the sentence. For this reason, *because of the angels*, a woman ought to wear her *exousia*/veil/freedom on her head.

All kinds of suggestions have been given as to the meaning of “angels” in 11:10. Is this a gloss? Can it be emended to mean “crowd”? Are these the sexually libidinous fallen angels of Gen 6:1–4? Are these genuine angels who participate in human worship?¹⁰ Harrisville calls this verse “an interpreter’s ‘cross.’”¹¹

Paul speaks in a variety of ways, throughout his letters, about angels. As with the rest of creation, angels are not always good. “Angels” may even be Satan in disguise (2 Cor 11:14). Angels may try to separate one from the love of God, but Paul remains convinced that even angels “will not be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39). Paul concludes that “even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!” (Gal 1:8).

⁹Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 518.

¹⁰See the discussion in Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 526–529, and in Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 839–841. Garland prefers the final option, that these are genuine angels, as do Richard B. Hayes, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) 188, and most recent interpreters.

¹¹Roy A. Harrisville, *1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 184.

From that perspective, Paul might be implying here that what appears to be a good messenger from God, an angel, may, in fact, be a bad messenger bearing a misguided message. Freedom from the veil may look like a good message from God. It may well be a worthy pursuit. But then Paul asks, in effect, "Just how much does this message mean to you? How compelling is this message for you?"

Paul knows about the compelling forces that seek to take possession of a person's life (Rom 7:15). He knows how worthy pursuits can become obsessive. He knows obsessions are imprisoning. He knows that an *obsession* to be free from the veil would cancel out whatever personal freedom comes with Christ. It is not possible to possess the freedom that comes with Christ and at the same time be dominated by an alien power.

So, if the Christian women of Corinth want to focus upon themselves, then, let them do so. Let them give full thought to themselves. But what, really, is in *their own* best interest? Freedom in Christ, understood properly, will mean for the Christian women of Corinth that, among other things, they will not allow themselves to be possessed by alien forces that seek from within to take hold of them. One who is free in Christ cannot, at the same time, be governed by foreign powers.

INTERDEPENDENCE AND PROPRIETY

Paul inserts, in 11:11–12, a basic biblical understanding: "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so man comes through woman." Underlying the entire discussion of the veiling of women is the fact that "in the Lord" a relationship of interdependence has been established. Man and woman, like all people, are joined to each other. They are to live as complementary partners. But this means far more than equality. Equality entails being on the same level with and independent from one another. Interdependence entails dependence upon one another, and submission and service to one another, even as the Lord is the chief servant of all (Mark 10:45).

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Paul returns, in 11:13–15, to draw upon community norms and customs. The Christian women of Corinth need to consider what is counted by their neighbors as "proper" (11:13). This is a matter of simple observation: "Judge for yourselves" (11:3). Ill-mannered impropriety is not acceptable to their neighbors. How can those who are free in Christ show any less regard for matters counted "proper?"

Additionally, there is the matter of what "nature" teaches (11:14). The community's view was stated by Cicero: "If we follow Nature as our guide, we shall

never go astray.”¹² The wearing of a veil was understood as required by nature. Whether, in fact, nature actually required the veil was not Paul’s concern. Of concern to him was what was perceived by the local community as required by nature.

Paul’s final reason for the veiling of women is that of church practice (11:16). If none of the foregoing reasons, from community norms and customs to matters such as “angels” and being “in the Lord,” are acceptable to the Christian women of Corinth, then Paul has one final word for them: the uniform practice of the church of God. Removal of the veil is not a recognized practice of the church of God. Church practice is determined by God’s people all together. Universal agreement is decisive. Richard Hays calls this argument Paul’s “trump card.”¹³

Further, Paul refuses to argue with them on this matter. Being “contentious” (11:16) is not acceptable. The Christian women of Corinth are called to be one with “all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus” (1:2).

Freedom in Christ entails primarily being set free for the sake of one’s neighbor and oneself. Only as his hearers understand this, can the message Paul delivered be properly received.

For all these reasons, then, Paul insists that the Christian women of Corinth continue to wear their veils. The reasons mentioned, for the most part, are general moral principles and customs, the contents of which may be questionable. Nevertheless, he argues for their observance by the Christian women of Corinth simply because of their significance to those who hold them. Scruples and customs reflect a perception of life and a sense of morality. Dismissal of such sentiments by those who are set free in Christ leaves little opportunity to bear witness to Christ and to share in the mission of the church. Their message about Christ will be readily rejected by the surrounding community.

Besides, as much as it is true that women belonging to the congregation in Corinth are set free in Christ from restraints such as the veil, they need to be on the alert not to allow themselves to become captive to an alien force.

They need to keep in mind, above everything else, that they have been set free in Christ for their neighbors and themselves. Whatever helps in accomplishing this purpose is to be pursued. Whatever hinders it is to be avoided. This is the *fullness* of freedom, not its restriction. This is the message Paul delivered.

THE STRUCTURE OF PAUL’S ETHICAL INSTRUCTION

First Corinthians 11:2–16 provides a paradigm for Paul’s ethical instruction throughout his writings. He regularly strings together a number of items, among which are society’s norms and customs, the contents of which may be question-

¹²Cicero, *De Officiis* I.100, trans. Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913) 103.

¹³Hays, *First Corinthians*, 190.

able. By way of them, however, Paul takes hold of meanings far more profound. What appear to be insensitivity and culturally conditioned rationalizations on his part become means to address matters of greatest concern. Freedom in Christ entails primarily being set free for the sake of one's neighbor and oneself. Only as his hearers understand this, can the message Paul delivered be properly received.

The way Paul structures his ethical exhortations becomes instructive for the way the church at the present time understands and addresses issues. As the church seeks to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and freedom in Christ, it needs to take into account what is valued in local settings. Even more broadly, given today's global context, the church needs to take into account how people around the world hear its message. Cultural mores and traditions, locally and globally, are of utmost consideration when it comes to the proclamation of Christ and the mission of the church. As the church seeks to address issues such as the veiling of women, the role of women, human sexuality, the definition of marriage, and countless other matters, its ethical choices, statements, and actions are to incorporate its most profound understanding of what it means to be free in Christ. In pursuit of various freedoms and liberties, as worthy as they might be, the church also needs to ask whether and to what extent their pursuit will help or hinder the mission of the church in the proclamation of Christ. Does it give glory to God in Christ? Does it build up the church in mission? ⊕

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