

“PRAYING AND PROPHESY- ING IN THE ASSEMBLIES: I CORINTHIANS 11:2-16” (CH 8) BY GORDON D. FEE

Thomas R. Schreiner

*Associate Dean, Scripture and Interpretation
Professor of New Testament Interpretation
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Kentucky*

Introduction

Gordon Fee has written an outstanding commentary on 1 Corinthians, and hence he is a natural choice for this article on 1 Cor 11:2-16 in *Discovering Biblical Equality*. He divides his article into an introduction, an analysis of the presenting issue in Corinth, an overview of Paul's response, the matter of women praying and prophesying, the meaning of the term "head," and the meaning of 1 Cor 11:10. In this review I will follow Fee's outline in responding to him.¹

Fee emphasizes the difficulty of the text in the introduction and in his analysis of the presenting issue, and argues that Paul's response to it is "generally relaxed" (142) and that Paul is not scolding the Corinthians. No one disputes that the text is complicated, and there are some dimensions of the text that will always elude certainty (such as the reference to angels in v. 10). Nevertheless, the burden of the text may still be discerned by readers today, even if we cannot solve every question. Furthermore, Fee overstates

the relaxed nature of Paul's response, for the language of shame and honor in the text would have spoken powerfully to the culture of Paul's day and would underscore the seriousness of his admonitions. Moreover, as we shall see, Fee underemphasizes the importance of v. 3 in the Pauline argument. On the other hand, Fee rightly suggests that the problem in the text probably relates mainly to the women, rather than to both men and women (contrary to Collins and Thiselton), and that the verses seem to relate to men and women in general rather than being limited to husbands and wives. Furthermore, he also correctly maintains that determining whether the cultural practice was some kind of head covering or related to the hairstyle of women is not crucial either for unpacking the meaning of the text or for discerning its contemporary application.

Fee's Overview of the Text

In Fee's overview of the passage, he argues that a woman who prays and

prophesies without proper adornment brings shame on both herself and on man as the head. He claims that the argument in v. 3 does “not control the whole passage” and is abandoned as Paul continues his argument (146). He quickly sketches in the argument of the rest of the passage, and concludes that the text centers on issues of honor and shame. One of the main weaknesses of Fee’s article surfaces here, for he devotes so much attention on the meaning of “head” and the disputed 1 Cor 11:10 that little space is left for an explanation of the text as a whole. Fee’s essay does not provide a clear and lucid explanation of the flow of the argument in the text. Nor is he particularly clear as to the main point of the text and its relevance for today. I think a reader who came to Fee’s essay desiring an overview of the passage would finish the article feeling frustrated, for he concentrates on a few issues and does not explicate as clearly the function and meaning of the entire unit. Fee’s main point seems to be that the text supports distinctions between the sexes during the present evil, but in my judgment he strays from what the text teaches in particular as to how these distinctions are to be preserved.

Nor is he convincing in minimizing the force of 1 Cor 11:3 in the text as a whole, for the argument of the passage functions as follows. The main point of the verses is found in vv. 4-6, v. 10a, and vv. 13-15, viz., Paul wants the women to adorn themselves in a proper way. Paul gives reasons for the admonition in v. 3, vv. 7-9, v. 10b, and v. 16. Verses 11-12 qualify the argument, so that the readers will not draw the false conclusions that women are inferior to men or that men can dispense with women. Even though women have a different role from men, they are equal to men in dignity, essence, and value. What is crucial to see here

(contrary to Fee) is that the reason given in v. 3 and the reasons posited in vv. 7-9 are complementary, so that it is not as if Paul abandons the argument from headship as he continues his explanation. Indeed, vv. 7-9 clarify that the role difference between men and women is *fundamental* to Paul’s entire argument, for it hails from the created order where the Lord clarified that women were created from men and for the sake of men. Fee’s very sketchy exegesis of vv. 8-9 blurs this point, so that the reader of his essay fails to see that Paul locates the role differences between men and women in the created order. The argument from creation is a transcultural argument, for it appeals to God’s intended pattern for human beings before the fall into sin. The importance of an argument from creation is confirmed when we realize that Paul’s argument against homosexuality also appeals to creation (Rom 1:26-27), as does Jesus’ argument against divorce (Matt 19:3-12 par.).

Prayer and Prophecy

Fee proceeds to discuss women praying and prophesying. He rightly claims that women should be able to pray and prophesy in the assembly, but his discussion is abstracted from the argument and not linked with the remainder of the text in a meaningful way. He imports 1 Corinthians 12-14 into the argument here, so that he wrongly focuses on speaking in tongues in discussing prayer. Furthermore, he indiscriminately lumps together prophesying and teaching, claiming that prayer and prophecy represent every form of ministry, so that we can conclude from this text that women are permitted to teach men as well. Fee fails to convince here, for Paul regularly distinguishes between the gifts (Rom 12:6-7; 1 Cor 12:28-29; Eph 4:11), and

enjoins elsewhere that women are not to teach or exercise authority over men (1 Tim 2:11-12). Prophecy is not the same gift as teaching, for the latter represents the transmission of tradition or Scripture which involves preparation before delivery. Prophecy, on the other hand, is the transmission of spontaneous revelations from God (1 Cor 14:29-33). This is confirmed by the prophetic ministry of Agabus who received spontaneous revelations from God about the famine in Jerusalem and Paul's imprisonment (Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11). His prophecies were not prepared messages, but revelations that came from the Lord that he conveyed to God's people.

Moreover, when women prayed or prophesied in the church, they were to do so with a demeanor that was submissive to male leadership. Such a reading explains why Paul draws attention to male headship over women before tackling the issue of adornment. What Paul emphasizes in 1 Corinthians is that women should pray and prophesy with proper adornment, for such adornment signified in Paul's cultural setting that the women prayed and prophesied in a way that was submissive to male leadership in the church. I have argued elsewhere that the transcendent principle in the passage is not how women adorn themselves, for the message sent by external adornment varies from culture to culture. The principle is that women are to pray and prophesy in such a way that they do not subvert male authority in the church. Fee says that the text is not about church order, and clearly it is not a detailed manual on such, but it does relate to how women are to conduct themselves in the gathered assembly, so in that sense church order is in view.

Headship

Fee also includes a long section on "head" (*kephalē*), which is clearly a crucial term in the passage. He argues that the term means "source" rather than "authority over" in 1 Cor 11:3. His discussion here is quite unsatisfying and unpersuasive. He does not interact at all with the numerous articles by Wayne Grudem on this term or the careful study of Joseph Fitzmyer.² He is correct, in my opinion, in suggesting that the term may mean "source" in Eph 4:15 and Col 2:19,³ but he underestimates the many texts in which the term means "authority over," and fails to see that this is the most common metaphorical meaning of the term. He does acknowledge that "head" refers to authority in Eph 1:22 and Col 2:10, but claims that such is not decisive for texts in which Christ is said to be the head of the church, since in both Ephesians and Colossians the emphasis is on Christ's headship over evil powers. Fee rightly remarks that Christ's headship is "*for the sake of the church*" (154, his italics). But he fails to see that the text also teaches Christ's authority *over the church*, for Paul emphasizes here that Christ is the "head over *all things*" (Eph 1:22), and this surely includes the church. Moreover, Christ is specifically said to be "the head of the church" in Eph 5:23, and as we shall see below the meaning in that context is clearly "authority over." In addition, the context of Col 1:18 also demonstrates that Jesus' headship over the church emphasizes his sovereign rule over the church, for the key themes in Col 1:15-20 are Christ's supremacy and lordship over both creation and the church.

Fee insists that when the husband is called the head of the wife in Eph 5:23 this means that the husband is the source for the wife's material sustenance. But

nothing is said about material support elsewhere in this text, and the focus is on Christ's spiritual provision for his people, so it seems like a leap to see a reference to material support provided by the husband here. Even more important, Fee fails to examine the context in which the term "head" is used in Ephesians 5. Note the argument in Eph 5:22-24, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands" (ESV). Wives are to *submit* to husbands *because* they are the head. So too, the church submits to Jesus Christ because he is her head. The emphasis on submission here plainly indicates that Paul is stressing both the husbands' authority over their wives and Christ's authority over the church. Context must determine how words are used, and the collocation of the words "submit" and "head" indicates that "head" refers to authority here, both when Paul speaks of the husband and of Christ. Fee abandons the context, which is the most crucial consideration in defining the meaning of a word, and simply inserts his preferred notion "source" in this instance.

Furthermore, even if the word "head" always means "source" (which is clearly not the case), the notion of authority is still implied in Pauline literature. If wives are to submit to husbands because husbands are their source, then husbands as the source also exercise authority over wives since they are to submit to their source! Such a notion is hardly surprising in the biblical world where primogeniture was commonly observed. Similarly, fathers and mothers are the source of their children, and by virtue of such serve as the authority over their children. It

is quite surprising that egalitarians fail to see that simply saying that the word means "source" does not verify their case regarding male and female roles. Fee also makes the mistake of saying that the notion that God is the head of Christ is "heterodox." He betrays here a remarkably weak understanding of church history since orthodox theologians from the time of the early fathers, the Reformers, and even up to our own day have argued for differences between the economic and immanent Trinity, without suggesting for a moment that Christ had lesser dignity, worth, or value than the Father.⁴ It is regrettable that this basic factual error is repeated so often by egalitarians, so that they suggest that those who disagree with them are heterodox. If they were more conversant with church history and systematic theology, such a mistake could be avoided.

1 Corinthians 11:10

The last part of Fee's article consists of a discussion of the notoriously difficult 1 Cor 11:10. Fee argues that Paul's wording actually reflects in part the view of the women in Corinth who believed in their own angelic status, so that they were convinced that they were beyond the gender distinctions of the present evil age. Paul then qualifies their views with his commentary in vv. 11-12. The women, according to Fee, had fallen prey to over-realized eschatology, and thought they lived in the age to come because they spoke in angelic tongues (1 Cor 13:1). Fee's explanation is certainly ingenious, but it stumbles right out of the blocks, for there is no evidence that Paul's wording in v. 10 should be construed as citation or paraphrase of the Corinthian women. What we have here are clearly Paul's own words regarding what the women should do. He commands them

to have a sign of authority on their head because of the angels. Even though many scholars argue that the expression cannot have a passive meaning, such a meaning is clearly the most natural in context. It explains well the qualification that immediately follows in vv. 11-12, for such a qualification which emphasizes the equality between men and women would be strange if Paul were already asserting such in v. 10. To say that Paul requires the women to have a sign of authority on their head also fits with the passage as a whole where Paul commands the women to be adorned properly. It seems that some of the earliest interpreters of the text shared the same view, for they substituted the term “veil” (*kalumma*) instead of “authority.” Though this reading is clearly secondary, it demonstrates that the earliest interpreters understood Paul in a way that accords with what is argued here. The reference to the angels is difficult and not decisive in any case for the main point of the passage. It seems that the view that Paul directs the women to have authority on their heads because angels serve as the guardians of Christian worship is still the most likely.

Conclusion

Gordon Fee is one of the outstanding NT scholars among evangelicals of this generation. Nevertheless, his exegesis of 1 Cor 11:2-16 does not prove to be convincing. His explanation of the text does not provide a clear and satisfying explanation of the flow of the argument of the entire passage. He blurs the meaning of prophecy so that it becomes indistinguishable from teaching, but these are two different spiritual gifts. He argues that the word “head” means “source,” but fails to account for the evidence supporting authority. Finally, he suggests an interpretation of 1

Cor 11:10 that is quite supportive of the meaning “authority over” and strays from the natural reading of the verse. A more natural reading of the passage is that Paul desires the women to adorn themselves properly because their adornment in the cultural world of the first century signaled whether they were submissive to male leadership in the gathered assembly. What applies to the church today is not the exact cultural practice commanded (whether Paul speaks of a veil, shawl, or hairstyle). It is the principle that women should conduct themselves in public worship with a demeanor that affirms and supports male leadership in the church. Women are encouraged to pray and prophesy in the assembly, and I understand the nearest equivalence to prophecy today to be the reading of Scripture. And yet they are not to engage in these activities in such a way that they arrogate male leadership. Women honor men and avoid shame if they conduct themselves as women in the gathered assembly, and that means that they behave in such a way that the role distinctions rooted in the created order are preserved. ■

¹ For a more detailed explanation of my own understanding of these verses, see Thomas R. Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 124-39, 485-90.

² See Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 544-99; Joseph Fitzmyer, “Another Look at *Kephalē* in 1 Corinthians 11:3,” *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 503-11.

³ Fee is convinced that the term means “source” in these texts. I am suggesting, on the other hand, that the term *may* have this meaning in these texts.

⁴ For helpful studies on this matter, see Robert Letham, “The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 65-78; Steven D. Kovach and Peter R. Schemm, Jr., “A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999): 461-76.