

Paul, Oppressor of Women or Radical Revolutionary?

Tonight we are going to place the apostle Paul in the spot light and examine, as well as we can, what he has said in his epistles about men and women. We are going to put him in the 'dock' (witness stand) and have him testify on his own behalf concerning what he has written about men, women, wives, and husbands.

From the very beginning of the church, he has been at the center of controversy for a variety of reasons. There were at least five. First was the authenticity of his authority as an apostle. Without wide acceptance within the church that he was, in fact, an apostle he would have been powerless to deal with the crisis that arose in the early church around issues of theology and behaviour. Doubts about his apostolic authority occurred because he did not fulfill the criteria established by the church in Jerusalem as they chose a replacement for Judas. Here, Luke quotes Peter.

“Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who had been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”
(Acts 1:21-22)

Strictly speaking, the apostle did not meet these conditions but he argued on several occasions that his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road placed him amongst the other apostles and it gave him the authority to speak normatively to the church he was helping to establish. So important was this encounter that Luke recounts it three times in Acts, twice from his point of view and once from Paul’s.

The second controversy involved his attitude towards circumcision. Some insisted that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to become members of the believing community but to this Paul gave a resounding no. He argued that such a practice would impose a burden on them that Jews themselves could not bear.

A third but related controversy centered on the inclusiveness of the message he preached. The apostle taught the radical idea that Gentiles, who follow Jesus as Lord and Saviour, are included in the covenant given to Abraham. His conviction was that the kingdom that Christ brought included Gentiles as well as Jews and that Christ was the one who broke down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile. Gentiles, he said, are branches grafted to root which is Israel. Acts tell us how this truth evolved in the life of the early church. (The Gospels also contain this conviction implicitly)

Some of Paul’s early critics accused him of preaching a Gospel that made no ethical demands. This is the fourth controversy. Paul took up this issue in the sixth chapter of Romans where he reasons that Christian baptism demands right

behaviour. **“For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.”** (Romans 6:14)

Some of my contemporary Jewish friends charge him with encouraging his fellow Jews to abandon Torah but this is a topic for another day. In modern times at least two controversies continue to rage.

Barbara and I were on our way to Vancouver to see our family, one of our several trips. We must have arrived at the airport late because we were unable to get two seats together; I had to sit several rows behind her in the middle seat, which I hate. About an hour into the flight, I got out my lap top to do some editing on what I had just completed writing as part of my preparation for the Berean class. I was aware that the man sitting next to me kept casting his eyes on the screen so I tilted it toward him. Eventually, he asked a question. “Are you writing a book?” I explained what I was writing and this led to a very friendly and interesting conversation that helped both of us find relief from the tedium of the flight. I discovered that he had been in Toronto either giving or hearing a lecture. He was a professor in History or English - I can't remember which. In any case, he had a better than average Biblical knowledge that became quite obvious as he shared his thoughts with me. He had a friendly attitude towards the Gospels and he thought that Jesus was probably the greatest teacher who ever lived. Paul he liked less. He felt that the apostle had somehow managed to take a carpenter's simple teaching and turn it into complicated abstractions. This man was drawn to Jesus but he thought of Paul in mostly negative terms.

Last month I went into a school to teach a special education class. I discovered that the regular principal was away on a medical leave and that he had been replaced by a retired principal I knew. During recess, I went to the office and sat down. I had not seen him for ten years so I asked what he had been doing in his retirement. He explained that he had decided to pursue more deeply some interests he had been unable to delve into before his retirement. Naturally, he asked me the same question I had asked him. I told him about my involvement with the adult class here at the church and how it was such a joy, especially since I had spent so many years teaching little kids.

He explained that his wife, a doctor, had an interest in the Bible but she wasn't so friendly with the Older Testament and she “couldn't stand the apostle Paul because of what he said about women.”

“What did he say about women”, I asked and you can easily guess the answer.

Whenever I am involved in a discussion of the Gospel with someone I find that they have a friendly attitude towards the Gospels. They feel drawn to its emphasis on love and they have no difficulty saying that Jesus was a great teacher and example of love in action but they have a decidedly different attitude towards the apostle Paul. If they are knowledgeable about the Newer Testament they express the view that Jesus taught a simple lesson of love but Paul was the real

originator of Christianity because he created a complex theology on top of the simple (so they think) narrative contained in the Gospels.

At some point in the conversation, they gleefully add fuel to the fire by accusing Paul of being the biggest sexist ever and if they are Biblically literate they will refer to the very texts we are going to consider this evening. When they have finished spewing their venom on the apostle, they give me that 'gotcha look'.

Before I go any further I want to give you a 'road map' of where I am going in my paper. There are five parts to my presentation.

1. I mention the attitude towards women in the Gospels and how this is willingly endorsed by Paul.
2. Next, I will refer to a brief passage in Galatians which functions as a template that controls all that the apostle says about human relationships.
3. Most of my paper involves a consideration of three Pauline texts that have, in my view, been poorly understood.
4. I also want to place his words in the context of Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture to see how he stacks up relative to each of these.
5. I will conclude with a reference to a passage in Ephesians where Paul uses Psalm 68 as a typology that contrasts earthly and heavenly power.

Jesus was the first feminist. He did what no rabbis would do in the first century; he spoke to women in public. The Samaritan woman, who came to the well by herself, was shocked when Jesus asked her for a drink. "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (John 4:9) According to the cultural norm, he should have avoided her because she was a woman and, even worse, a Samaritan.

Not only did Jesus speak to women in public, they were allowed and even encouraged to touch him. When his feet were washed by a woman who untied her hair, (the sign of a loose woman) Jesus accepted her actions, not as a scandalous, but as worship. He stopped when he felt the touch of the woman in the crowd and, instead of rebuking her, pronounced her forgiven. Here is how Luke reports the incident. "**Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet.**" (Luke 8:47) She knew that she had broken a taboo and, mistakenly, she anticipated a rebuke but it never came. Married and single women followed him everywhere because they were included in his band of disciples. And most revolutionary of all, it was women who made the discovery of the empty tomb.

I believe that Paul knew of Jesus' attitude and he endorsed it enthusiastically. His letters mention women believers **by name**. Syntyche and Euodia were members of the Philippian Baptist Church and Paul described them as women who **worked beside him**. They were not his underlings; they were fellow workers on a par with him. His letter to the Romans ends with a mention of several church leaders and eight are women.

In Romans 16:1-2, Phoebe is described as both a 'deacon' and a 'patron' and, if we assume that Romans was written before Philippians, she is the first person in Christian history to receive such a title. In the same passage, Prisca and Aquila are introduced and the fact that Prisca is named before her husband suggests that she was the more dominant person. In any case, it is hard to doubt the prominent leadership role she must have played in the church. Paul, apparently, has no difficulty recognizing this fact. Later, in the same passage, Paul mentions two women named Andronicus and Junia. They are described as fellow prisoners and **“outstanding among the apostles”**, (in the sense that they do the work of an apostle) who were also in Christ before me.” These women are identified because they are particularly 'hard working'. The term Paul uses is *kopiao* and it is a word he uses exclusively for those whose ministry and leadership are exemplary. At the very least, it cannot be argued that the apostle had a low view of women because the weight of this preliminary evidence is convincingly to the contrary.

The question I want to deal with this evening is clear and straight forward. Is the apostle Paul the oppressor of women or is he just the opposite – a radical revolutionary, light years ahead of his time? Does he believe in a hierarchical chain of authority, intended by God, whereby women are to obey men or does he teach another ethic altogether? He is often accused of the former, largely based on his writing in Ephesians, 1 Corinthians and Colossians. Here are three examples:

“Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”
(Ephesians 5:22-24)

“Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord”.
(Colossians 3:18)

“Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of every woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” (1 Corinthians 11:3)

The passage in Ephesians is the one we will use last in an attempt to answer the question. Concerning this passage, I want to quote Dr. Victor Shepherd. “Recently I have heard stories of women from the more effusive, more demonstrative Christian denominations whose husbands abuse them and then throw Ephesians 5 at them. Even where there isn't abuse, the verse is still cited as legitimating the superiority of husband over wife; he is chief, master, sovereign, while she in turn is subject, servant, even serf. In any case, he is the ruler and she is ruled. By extension, it is assumed that males ought to be company presidents and females clerks; males prime ministers and females backbenchers.” (Sermon by Victor Shepherd 1993)

Certainly, we are compelled to deal honestly with what the apostle has written and we must apply all the intellectual integrity we can muster. We do not, in my view, have permission to ignore what he says or pull it out of shape and make it say what we want. Nor should we give his writing a lower priority than the Gospels and finally we must resist the temptation to read the Biblical text as if its meaning is informed by modern culture, not the other way around.

Paul was in the business of establishing churches in another culture almost two thousand years ago so some of what he has to say is often particular to the specific situation of the early church so what he wrote may not always have a direct application for us now. After all, we do not insist that women cover their heads when praying nor do we recommend celibacy as the ultimate expression of Christian obedience and faithfulness.

Whenever we read the apostle, we must search the text carefully to see whether or not he is announcing a truth that is true over time and across cultures. I believe that these passages carry an important theological message that is as true for us as it was for the early church.

I believe that, as an ordinary lay person, the writing of the apostle can be well understood without waiting around until the experts tell us what we ought to think. After all, the Bible is meant to be read by ordinary people like you and I as long as we bring our full powers of thought to the reading.

Before, we think through the passage in Ephesians I want to discuss some of Paul's other teaching as it relates to women, men, and marriage. I have provided you with a copy of these so you can follow along. First, the magnificent passage in his letter to the Galatians where he says:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Recently, this text jumped off the page as I was reading it. For several years I thought of Paul as one who brings a message of individual salvation as his main concern. I read him as if his only interest is how the ravages of the fall are overturned for every repentant person by Christ's life, death and resurrection. For me, his great doctrine of 'Justification by Faith' has been the essential doctrine at the very center of his theology. I read him with the understanding that he was countering a religion that had descended into 'works righteousness'.

I still believe that the reconciliation of individual sinners by the atoning death of Christ is at the center of his theology but lately I have come to understand him in terms of an even bigger vision. I now see that the Galatian passage is really what the apostle is all about. Paul sees the significance of the incarnation, the cross, and the empty tomb as the means of reconciliation for **“all things in heaven**

and on earth” (Ephesians 1:10) The formation and establishment of harmonious relationships everywhere in creation is the work that God is doing through His son. And this includes man/woman relationships as well.

From his statement in Galatians, I draw an immediate conclusion; the notion that Paul wrote to promote the superiority of male over female or husband over wife or anybody over anybody is a logical impossibility. That any person has dominion over another is as far from Paul as the east is from the west.

In the passage quoted from Galatians, Paul mentions three distinct categories. The first is ethnicity (Jew and Greek), the second economic (slave and free), and the third is gender. (male and female) Now it is obvious that the first and third still exist while the middle one has seen its last days in our culture. (Although it continued in Paul’s time) Ethnicity and gender differences are facts of life so Paul cannot be speaking literally; he cannot mean that we are all neutered in some way; his meaning is theological.

He must mean that God has acted in Christ to dismantle the barriers that exist between people because of a notion of self evident superiority; Jews are not superior to Gentiles, masters are not superior to slaves, and men are not superior to women. These categories, while real, are of no eternal significance so it is unthinkable that he believed in the superiority of some individuals over others as the natural state of affairs and the intention of God. Men and women stand on level ground. In Christ, there is no basis for male domination or female subservience. Gender differentiation exists but the notion of gender superiority is groundless and sinful.

About this text James Dunn, the Pauline scholar, has written, “These racial, social, and gender differentiations, which as such were often thought to indicate relative worth or privilege status before God, no longer had that significance.” (James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, page 593)

First Corinthians presents the greatest challenge amongst the four texts I have chosen and it deals with the problem of head covering. Reading this letter is like listening to one end of a telephone conversation; sometimes we have to infer what the other side is saying and in this case it is a bit difficult because we cannot know exactly why the problem of head covering arose in the first place. The Corinthians knew but we do not. However, it is reasonable to assume that the women in the Corinthian church had taken seriously his teaching concerning the equality of men and women so they were praying and prophesying with heads uncovered. They had, however, misunderstood the application of Paul’s teaching. This practice caused Paul great unhappiness because of the statement behind the practice, not the practice itself. Head covering, per se, isn’t the problem but the consequence of their non conformity to the cultural norm is. Here’s the full text.

“Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of every woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every

man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head- it is as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. But everything comes from God. Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God.” (1Corinthians 11:2-16)

Any reasonable person, reading the passage for the first time (or the thirtieth time) would most likely draw the conclusion that he is establishing a chain of authority – a hierarchy of some sort. After all, we speak of some one being the ‘head’ of a company and when we go into a restaurant we may ask to see the ‘head’ waiter. Associating ‘head’ with authority is a natural thing to do because this is, in fact, what the word means in today’s parlance but it is not necessarily the meaning Paul intends. I am going to argue that Paul has used this word to convey another concept altogether.

Obviously, the word ‘head’ is offered as a metaphor but is it actually a reference to authority of some kind? I argue that it does not for five reasons.

1. If Paul was using ‘head’ to mean authority as if to say the woman is obligated to obey the man, then it is difficult to see how this meaning would contribute to the argument he makes about ‘head covering’. His appeal to them is theological, not authoritative. He wants them to cover their heads in recognition of an important truth. Paul, through out the paragraph, makes every effort to persuade rather than impose and he does not speak from a position of authority conferred upon him by his maleness. If the issue was the authority of men over women, he would have presented his case on that basis. Willing consent is his goal, not blind obedience as a response to authority.
2. The word ‘authority’ appears only once in the entire passage and in this case it refers to the woman’s ‘authority’ over her head. The beginning of this sentence is impossible to understand but the natural meaning of what follows is that women have the responsibility to decide what is right. This is hardly what he would say if he believed they should do as he says

- because he speaks with male authority. Again, Paul is persuading rather than commanding.
3. The main thrust of his argument here and in other relevant passages is the unique complimentary nature of woman/man relationship- not authority.
 4. If Paul believed that men have authority over women I cannot imagine why he would say, **“In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.”** With this statement, Paul is recognizing the fact that men and women require the woman/man relationship in order to be complete. Notice that he writes woman/man, not husband/wife because a person does not require marriage to be a whole person.
 5. Other related Pauline passages, particularly Galatians 3:28 do not support the notion of male authority over woman.

The passage begins with three references to the ‘head’ used as a metaphor that refers to three different and unique relationships – man/Christ, woman/man, and Christ/God. What meaning does he intend by these three parallel phrases? Perhaps Paul chose the word ‘head’ as a clever device that leads naturally to his discussion of ‘head’ covering. ‘Head’ is used, not to substantiate a hierarchy, but to address the issue of relational responsibility within unique relationships.

Perhaps I should not mention the fact that I watch every documentary of the Second World War on the history channel. I’ve seen them all and not just once. On Remembrance Day I watched my own personal copy of “Saving Private Ryan” again and I have all the episodes of “Band of Brothers”. There’s a scene in “Private Ryan” where Tom Hanks leads a small band of his men against a German machine gun nest. He takes the most dangerous position by running up the middle to draw fire away from his men.

The term Paul uses for ‘head’ kephale. He could have used archon which means ruler, chief, or boss. Kephale is actually a military term and it refers to the soldier who takes the greatest risk by absorbing the enemy’s fire power. Now, what Paul means when he says that the man is ‘head’ of his wife begins to emerge. He is his wife’s point man. It is his task and responsibility to assume the most vulnerable position. He is the one expected to assume the greatest risk. The man, therefore, is the woman’s protector, not her ruler. This is one aspect of the man/woman relationship.

The solution to the problem of ‘head covering’, Paul places squarely on its women members. The complementarity of male and female relationships was being affected because some women, by their appearance, were acting in a manner that eliminated distinctions between the sexes. For this reason, they were bringing ‘shame’ on the man/woman relationship which the apostle sees as essential for both genders. Blurring gender lines corrupts (ie shames/dishonours) the

complementary nature of the woman/man relationship where each gender provides the other with what it cannot provide for itself. Paul does not agree that a person can be ‘intact’ in and of themselves.

It is highly probable that these women thought that the inauguration of the ‘new age’ meant that they had the freedom to express themselves as they wished because the cultural norm governing head covering, no longer applied. In short, they had failed to comprehend the fact that what is permissible is not necessarily beneficial. If this is the problem Paul is countering, then his concern is their need to conform to the cultural norm as an expression of the unique woman/man relationship. Within this relationship, woman is ‘man’s glory’ (11:7-9) because, without her, he is incomplete. Again, Paul is affirming the fact that Christian men and women are called to live interdependently. Mutual submissiveness is the principle that informs their relationship, not personal self expression.

In verse 4, Paul deals with the specific issue of head covering and he begins his argument with men. He sets up an analogous situation where men could also bring ‘dishonour to his ‘head’ during public worship by covering their heads. Remember that the word ‘head’ is used metaphorically so he means that the man will bring dishonour to Christ. Paul assumes that his readers will agree with him so he includes no explanation. We have to admit that we do not know what the cultural norm was that caused to the problem in the first place. In any case, Paul has discussed a hypothetical situation in order to show that men are capable of bringing dishonour just as women are.

Then he writes, **“And every woman who prays and prophecies with her head uncovered dishonours her head- it is just as though her head was shaved.”** (11:5) If the entire passage is used to provide context then Paul is not saying that she brings dishonour to her husband. He is speaking much more widely and saying that the woman dishonours the female/male relationship in general. This is the reason Paul wants them to return to what is customary. He does not regard the cultural norm as divine. He is simply concerned that their non conformity to an accepted practice has provoked disharmony in the community by blurring the gender distinction necessary for complementary relationships between men and women.

James Dunn, the Pauline, scholar suggests another possibility. “Since disheveled hair could evoke a picture of ritual ecstasy familiar to several Greek cults, the fear would be that outsiders might think the new Christian church was simply another ecstatic cult. Such practices within the gatherings of the church, open as they were to outsiders, might well be regarded by them as ‘shameful’ as shameful as women being completely shorn. The argument of 11:2-16, then, is not so much about “creational” differences between men and women, but primarily in support of the custom of bound up hair. And this not in order to restrict women prophesying, but in order that their prophesying might, with a ‘proper’ hairstyle, not be distracting.” (James Dunn, page 590-591)

The English scholar, David Wenham, says the following concerning this passage. He believes that the apostle is rejecting celibacy as the highest spiritual calling. “It may have been that the same women were claiming that sex and marriage had no place in the new order – the issue that Paul has to deal with in 1 Corinthians 7. Paul goes along way with these liberated Christian women, accepting their right to pray and prophecy and acknowledging the value of celibacy; but he questions aspects of their interpretation, reminding them of the male female creation order and insisting that celibacy is not for everyone.” (David Wenham, Paul - Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity, page 236)

Later, in the same book, he (Wenham) raises the possibility that a misinterpretation of Galatians 3:28 had taken place in the early church. They had come to believe that the new age had been fully inaugurated bring with it an end to normal male female relationships. “It also probably led some of them to infer that there should be no more sex: After all, if the new age had come and there is no more male or female, sex arguably no longer has any place among spiritual people. At least the really spiritual and the really holy should abstain from sexual activity.” (Ibid, page 247-248)

No matter which interpretation you take on the matter of head covering, it has nothing to do with man’s superiority over women.

Paul continues his argument in the next paragraph and his manner of reasoning is a tad strange for twenty first century people. His purpose seems to be to add weight to what he has already said and what he writes is both complex and surprising. It is bothersome that Paul says that only the male is made in the image of God, not the woman. It is clear from the passage that women are also created in the image of God since he wrote that **‘everything comes from God’**. I believe that Paul is thinking about creation as he writes and he is reviewing its order. Man was created first from the dust of the ground so, in this sense, he is fashioned directly by God and is, therefore, in God’s image. But surprisingly, he uses a word that does not appear in the Genesis account; he adds that man is God’s ‘glory’. (11:7b) Gordon Fee, a Canadian scholar offers two interpretations but the one he favours relates to man’s unique relationship to God. Paul describes man in this way in order to set up a parallel relationship; man’s relationship with women is equally unique such that praying and prophesying with head uncovered disregards the distinction between the sexes and it interrupts the complementary relationship that God has intended right from creation.

Then Paul writes:

“For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have authority over her head. In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman came from

man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” (11:8-12)

At first reading, the text seems to establish the superiority of men over women and this would be the only reading possible were it not for verse 11-12. Here, the apostle seems to realize the possibility of misinterpretation so he adds an important qualification that limits his intended meaning to the basic argument he is making. Paul wants to say that man, without the unique man/woman relationship is alone without a suitable companion. Fee puts it beautifully. “She is thus man’s glory because she ‘came from man’ and was created ‘for him’. She is not thereby subordinate to him, but necessary for him. She exists to his honour as the one who having come from man is the one companion suitable to him, so that he might be complete and that together they might form humanity.” (Gordon Fee, Commentary on 1 Corinthians, page 517) The apostle’s case is that women, by their conformity to the cultural norm, provide a visible recognition of the gender distinction necessary for the complementary woman/man relationship that God established at creation.

Verse 10 has been translated variously because no one has much of a clue as to what it means so the best choice is to admit it and move on.

Finally, the paragraph comes to an end with, **“In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.”** (11:11-12) Paul has already said the woman is man’s glory meaning that without her, he is incomplete in some way. These two verses act as an important qualification. Women do not exist simply to be used by men as a means of fulfilling their purposes and they are not pawns, living subordinately to a man’s will. Instead, women are intended by God to live within a mutually beneficial relationship where each requires the other. This is the nature of the woman/man relationship.

The last paragraph in this discussion reads as follows:

“Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no such practice—nor do the churches of God.” (11:13-16)

With this paragraph, Paul returns to the argument he made in verse 4-6 and he begins with an appeal to their sense of what is right and wrong. He asks two rhetorical questions expecting a ‘no’ answer to the first and a ‘yes’ to the second. They are expected to answer him on the basis of **‘the very nature of things’**. (11:14) Paul is not assuming that a natural law exists as the source for their answer. I know of no passage in Paul where he states that nature, by itself,

reveals the will and purpose of God. 'Nature' is probably a simple reference to the custom or cultural norm that is commonly accepted; he is not arguing that nature itself tells them that women must have long hair and men short hair.

Paul assumes that his readers know the custom that should be followed; long hair on a man is a disgrace because it hides his gender distinction whereas long hair brings 'glory' to her because it affirms her gender and allows the woman to experience the uniqueness of the woman/man relationship.

"For long hair is given as a covering" (11:15) seems to mean that the practice of covering the head when praying or prophesying flows naturally from the fact of long hair. Admittedly, the logic of this last statement may have been much more transparent and convincing to the Corinthians than to us.

If one considers this entire passage, it is impossible to draw the conclusion that the apostle believes that men can claim authority over women or that women are inferior to men as an intention of God. Relative to the culture of his day, Paul is revolutionary because he believes that both men and women require the mutuality of the man/woman relationship and that each is incomplete without the other whether they are married or single.

Chapter 7 of this same letter deals with several issues around marriage but for the purpose of this paper I will be discussing the first 7 verses only. Here is what Paul wrote:

"Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourself to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that." (1Corinthians 7:1-7)

This is a remarkable statement to make and, considering his time and culture, it is nothing short of revolutionary. This passage seems simple on the surface but it presents one particular difficulty. Paul writes that he is responding to a question they had previously asked. The first thing we must decide is whether **"It is good for a man not to marry"** is a statement that Paul makes or whether it is a quotation from their letter with which he disagrees. (Quotation marks did not exist in first century Greek.) Either way, what he says remains revolutionary.

1. Let's begin our exegesis by assuming that **“It is good for a man not to marry”** is actually Paul's statement, not theirs, in which case the apostle is explaining that the unmarried state is 'good' (preferable) but not possible for everyone. The next three verses (7:2-4) are remarkably balanced statements where marriage exists for the mutual benefit of both the man and the wife. This fact alone is light years ahead of what existed in the Jewish, Greek, and Roman culture that I will mention later in this paper.

If the reader assumes that the statement in the first verse is, in fact, Paul's then what he says next is intended as a qualification. He means that though the single or celibate state is preferable, it is not possible for everyone. The unmarried state brings with it temptation to satisfy the sex drive outside of marriage. Sexual union, between unmarried people, is sinful because it contradicts the exclusivity and uniqueness of the marriage relationship so it is better to be married rather than attempt to live as a single person and be overwhelmed by temptation. It follows naturally that, within marriage, each partner has the responsibility to satisfy the needs of the other. Again, this is a stunning statement for the first century. Paul continues to underline the importance of mutuality in marriage where each person has a claim on their married partner so, for this reason, there is never a time when one person's needs have precedence over the others.

Next, he sets limits for the person in the marriage who desires to withdraw from normal sexual relationship for some reason or other. He insists that abstinence requires mutual consent and that it is for the purpose of prayer for a limited period of time.

At the end of the paragraph, Paul writes that celibacy is preferable but he is willing to look favourably upon those living within a normal marriage. This attitude, he regards as a concession to the preferred celibate state.

2. There is a second way to approach the text. The reader can begin with the assumption that **“It is good for a man not to marry”** is actually not Paul's statement but theirs. If this is the case, then the rest of the paragraph becomes an argument intended to refute their initial premise. I personally believe that the weight of the evidence provided by the letter is on the side that it is their statement, not Paul's.

The contemporary reader needs to ask why this community came to the conclusion that 'It is good not to marry' by considering the entire letter of 1 Corinthians. The Corinthian church was a troubled church with many problems of thought, word, and deed. Various scholars have summarized the problem using the term 'overrealized eschatology'. This term refers to the false notion that they had already been 'perfected'.

Some members of this church believed that they had been possessed of the Spirit in a unique way that made them superior. They had a form of spiritual elitism

partnered with arrogance and the sign of their superiority was ‘tongue speaking’, the gift they emphasized and valued most. In addition, their sense of special endowment caused them to see themselves as uniquely wise and knowledgeable in things spiritual. Their exaggerated sense of spiritual accomplishment caused them to assume that their earthly behaviour had no effect on their true ‘spirituality’.

Finally, the Gospel had not yet fully countered the life long influence of the Hellenistic world view which gave them a dim view of the material world, including the body. They reasoned that since the body had no eschatological significance, it followed naturally that it had no real importance in this world.

Interestingly, this mode of reasoning produced two divergent consequences. Either it led to license and sexual immorality of various kinds or it resulted in body denial and a preference for celibacy as a sign of spiritual accomplishment. The latter is, I believe, what the apostle is arguing against in this passage.

Assuming that the statement is theirs, not Paul’s, then his argument can be summarized as follows:

1. Celibacy cannot be the ultimate sign of spirituality because it leads to overwhelming temptation that is avoided only by marriage.
2. Within marriage, both partners have an obligation to meet the others physical needs.
3. No married person has the right to decide to be celibate unilaterally because of the principle of shared ownership of the body.
4. Celibacy is desirable only when it involves mutual consent for a limited period of time.
5. The celibate life requires the ‘gift of celibacy’ so it must not be imposed on anyone as a spiritual requirement.

The bottom line is this. Women and men, wives and husbands are equally responsible to one another. The decision to be celibate requires mutual consent. It cannot be imposed on the wife by her husband.

The final passage we will consider is the one in Ephesians 5. It is my contention that a faithful exegesis requires us to consider the passage in the context of the entire letter in order to understand how these three human institutions, including marriage, illustrate how his message applies in every aspect of life both for the early church and for us as well.

In some translations there is a break after verse 21. Quite rightly, the Good News Bible places this verse in the same paragraph as verse 22 because it serves as the theme for the rest of the chapter. It is critical to see this verse as foundational for everything that follows. Paul does not offer a suggestion nor is he merely stating a preference. He is issuing a command that results in worship when it is obeyed. It reads: **“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”**

Clearly, Paul wants this statement to be the operating principle for the text that follows where he discusses the notion of submission and mutuality as it relates to three institutions that existed in the church and in society as well. In the interest of time, I will discuss only the passage on marriage. (We can discuss the others later if you wish.)

“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or another blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Ephesians 5: 22-33)

Paul chose these relationships because they involve highly unequal relationships as defined by the culture of the day. His words contain an interesting pattern; the stronger party is always mentioned last and what he says contains unexpected surprises for the culture of the day.

He gives his attention to marriage, the family, and finally to the ancient institution of slavery. These three Paul uses to teach a lesson about Christian submission and mutuality as an expression of reverence for Christ. (5:21) Admittedly, this passage is highly controversial in today’s politically correct world, particularly as it relates to marriage. Paul’s words cause the hair on some people’s necks to bristle and others are aroused to such anger that they accuse Paul of extreme sexism. His modern day critics view him disdainfully as an oppressor and exploiter of women and they warn us that his teaching, if taken seriously, would counter-act the multitude of advances made during the last century by women.

Here are the key questions. Is Paul recommending a paradigm for the distribution of power within marriage as a key to its success or is he really writing about the attitude of mutual submission that holds for all human relationships, including marriage.

Women in Jewish Culture

When Paul was alive, his own Jewish community had a low view of women. During Morning Prayer, a Jewish man would often thank God because he was not a Gentile, slave, or a woman. Under Jewish law a woman was bereft of rights and, if married, the husband could do as he liked with her. Women, on the other hand, could not divorce their husbands for any reason. The wife was listed as the one of the husband's possessions along with his animals. In Paul's day, a man could divorce his wife simply by issuing a writ of divorce and no just cause needed to be given. (depending on the rabbi that was followed) Woman, however, had no right of divorce under any conditions so many Jewish women refused marriage for fear of being abused.

Women in Greek Culture

Here the situation was even worse. Prostitution was an integral part of Greek life so women were seen as objects of pleasure and their non status as persons was a reflection of this practice. Greek men saw their wives as the bearers of their children and the manager of their day to day household affairs but they looked to other women for pleasure, intimacy, and companionship. Women of the upper classes lived very isolated lives, taking no part in public affairs. Married women did not have enough status to allow them to go out alone. Wives never ate at family meals nor did they appear at important social functions. They lived alone in an apartment that no other person was allowed to enter with the exception of the husband. Greek women of the upper classes had little companionship or fellowship in marriage and to make matters worse, there was no possibility of divorce. Her home life was devoid of friendship, fidelity, and security.

Women in Roman Culture

Paul lived during a time when the institution of marriage was breaking down in Roman culture. The Romans were noted for their careful record keeping and during the first five hundred years of the Republic there is no record of a single divorce but eventually things changed. The first recorded divorce occurred in 234 B.C.E. and it involved Spurius Carvilius Ruga.

Seneca, the Roman historian cynically wrote that women were married to divorce and divorced to marry. He also recorded that women dated their years by using the names of their numerous husbands. Divorce occurred so frequently that Juvenal wrote that one Roman woman had married twenty three times and her last marriage was to a man whose marriage to her was his twenty first. Roman marriage did not involve fidelity so the marriage bond was well on its way to a complete breakdown. This sad state of affairs must have victimized women more than men and contributed to their powerlessness within Roman society.

There is a pattern in Paul's discussion of marriage, family, and slavery. Each involves a relationship where, for one cultural reason or another, one person is more powerful than the other. Notably, the most powerful person is mentioned

last and given the greatest responsibility and herein lies the radical nature of Paul's teaching.

Christian Marriage According to Paul (Ephesians 5:22-33)

By placing Paul's words in their social and cultural context, the modern reader can't help but to draw the conclusion that his teaching on marriage was a great advancement from the norms of the day. A proper exegesis requires attention to the analogy Paul develops in addition to the theology of the letter as a whole.

The first thing to note is that the passage consists of two parts. The first consists of the woman's responsibilities to the husband and the second to the husband's responsibilities towards her. Interestingly, the man's responsibility receives the longest discussion. (8 verses as opposed to 4 verses) Obviously, Paul thought that a marriage required both the husband and the wife to act in ways that benefit the other but he decided to emphasize the man's role. (I make this conclusion on the basis that he lingers over the man's role.) It is difficult to imagine such a concept or emphasis existing in the Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures. In this respect, Paul's teaching is radically revolutionary.

As this passage is read, the major theme of the letter must provide the context. Paul has been presenting the case that the entire event of Christ was for the purpose of reconciling "all things in heaven and earth". (1:10) His teaching is that God has always intended to create harmonious relationships between groups of disparate people (Jews and non Jews) and individuals as well. Therefore, any relationship that involves exploitation or dominance is not the intention of God nor is it the teaching of Paul. Whatever difficulties we have with Paul's teaching, we cannot read him as if he is promoting a husband's right to dominate and selfishly exploit his wife. Throughout the letter, Paul develops the notion of mutual submission and this fact must be kept in mind.

The main difficulty in verse 22-24 comes from the word 'submit' (hupakouo) because it carries with it a highly negative connotation in today's society. Submission requires a person to see themselves as powerless and lacking in status. The submissive person is one who recognizes another's right to make decisions for them on all important matters. But this is not what the apostle means.

The first thing to notice is that the word 'submit' is defined by an analogy. Paul compares the marriage relationship to Christ's relationship with the church and this comparison defines what 'submission' means. Submission is not made in recognition of a hierarchical power structure designed for the advantage of one of the partners. It has another function entirely.

When the church submits to Christ it does so in order to receive a benefit that only Christ can provide. God, in Christ, saves the church, makes it His own, and empowers it to become what He intends it to be. Christ's death on the cross is an

act of condescension and service whereby He experiences the loss of his intimacy with God as means of giving the church what it needs but cannot do for itself. Christ is the church's Saviour and servant. Carrying Paul's analogy forward, the reader of Paul can conclude that the purpose of the wife's submission is not so she can be permanently 'bossed around' by the husband; it is so that the husband can be her servant and protector and do for her what she is unable to do for herself. In other words, the wife submits and gives permission to her husband to serve her as Christ served the church and gave himself for it. The wife's submission to the husband allows him to become vulnerable for her sake. In this way, the wife recognizes the uniqueness of the wife/husband relationship.

There is another aspect to the analogy that Paul has drawn. Christ's sacrificial death on the cross means that we are compelled to recognize his claim upon us. Similarly, the Christian wife is required to accept her husband's claim upon her. Like her, he is a person in need of those resources only she can provide. Her obligation is to give of herself for his sake just as Christ has done for the church. The wife's submission makes possible the complementary relationship between husband and wife to function as it should. Her willingness to submit is not a euphemism for blind unquestioning obedience to a higher authority. Her submission allows her husband to serve her as she serves him.

The husband's role is complimentary to the wife's 'submission'. The first thing he must do is love his wife **“as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”**. (5:25) Here, the husband's role in the marriage is to freely give his wife everything he has that will enable her to become 'holy'. He does not have permission to be her drill sergeant shouting orders to be blindly followed. Instead, what Christ did for the church, he is to do for her.

There is a second imperative. The husband must love his wife as his own body and he must keep in mind that his wife is part of Christ's body, the church. (5:29-30) He is her partner, not her owner. The notion that Paul believed in the superiority of men over women and that he gave permission for husbands to assume a dominant and dictatorial role in marriage cannot be read into Paul's teaching. This passage was written for the benefit of married women where her well being is her husband's main responsibility just as his well being is hers.

Conclusion

I began with question. Is Paul an oppressor of women or is he radically revolutionary? For me, the evidence provided by the text is overwhelming - he is radically revolutionary. Those who accuse him of being an oppressor have judged him contrary to the evidence provided by his own words.

Paul believed that God revealed in Jesus Christ is a reconciling God. By his life, death, and resurrection, Christ has broken down the barriers that separate us from God and from each other. He believed that God created us to live in

harmonious relationships where each submits to the other and this is His instrument to make us 'holy'.

He believed that God created men and women as compliments to each another. Neither is complete without the other. The marriage relationship brings a man and a woman together in a union of mutual submission where each person is focused on the needs of the other.

Finally, the apostle believed that the Christian ethic of mutual submission in all relationships is revealed by the condescending Christ. In the fourth chapter of Ephesians, Paul quotes Psalm 68.

It presents a picture of a powerful victorious God who has routed His enemies with irresistible and overwhelming power. The conquering king enters Jerusalem and ascends to his place of authority with the evidence of his victory trailing behind. The king's victory gives him such status that even the rebellious recognize him by giving gifts.

When **you** ascended on high,
you led captives in your train;
you **received** gifts **from** men,
even from the rebellious –
that you, O Lord, might dwell there.

Paul, on the other hand, applies the Psalm directly to Christ by changing the pronoun **you** to **he**. Like the king in the Psalm, Christ too has a place of authority but his kingship has a different purpose; he gives gifts rather than receives them.

Paul makes an unexpected inference from the word 'ascended'. He reasons that because the king 'ascended' he must have 'descended' which gives the king a new attribute; unlike David's king, Paul's is a seeking and condescending king who has conquered for the sole purpose of distributing the assets he has won to the people he loves. The earthly king expresses his power by going up but the heavenly king expresses his by going down. The earthly king uses his power to apply control and gain the adulation of the crowd but the heavenly one uses his to serve. He comes amongst the people to distribute His gifts.

The Psalmist's king announces his victory by striding into Jerusalem with the spoils of his victory following closely behind. He takes his place of authority on a throne well above the reach of the cheering crowd who offer him gifts and adoration. Christ the king comes down from his place of authority to where the crowd can touch him and he gives them gifts. Herein lies the pattern for all human relations.

“Who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the

very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on the cross!” (Philippians 2:6-8)

Lecture by Peter Ferguson
Friday February 23, 2007
7:30 pm in the Lecture Hall