

43. The Question of Women

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Paul's letters were edited by his associates, around 71. One thing they did, as we have just seen, was to minimize the conflict between Paul and the Alpha Christians. Another area of conflict was women. In Paul's churches, women sometimes held positions of leadership, in contrast to their sharply limited social role outside. This led to tensions with the outside world, which the editors were concerned to cool down. Passages were added to Paul's letters which prescribed female conduct more in line with conventional ideas.

One such passage is this one, which was interpolated into 1 Corinthians. The verses before and after it are included, to make the interpolation obvious:

Now I praise you that ye remember me in all things, and hold fast the traditions, even as I delivered them to you.

But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God. Any man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoreth his head. But every woman praying or prophesying with her head unveiled dishonoreth her head, for it is one and the same thing as if she were shaven. For if a woman is not veiled, let her also be shorn, but if it is a shame to a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be veiled. For a man indeed ought not to have his head veiled, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man, for neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man. For this cause ought the woman to have a sign of authority on her head, because of angels. Nevertheless, neither is the woman without the man, nor the man without the woman, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, so is the man also by the woman, but all things are of God. Judge ye in yourselves: Is it seemly that a woman pray unto God unveiled? Doth not even nature itself teach you, that if a man have long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her, for her hair is given her for a covering. But if any man seemeth to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither do the churches of God.

But in giving you this charge, I praise you not . . .



Reflections

Three things give this passage away as an interpolation. One, it is off topic; the announced subject of this part of 1 Corinthians is food offered to idols, and communal food in general, not hair. Two, it is interruptive. The passages before and after it are on the subject of food, and the word “praise” in the verse before this passage is picked up by the refusal to “praise” in the verse following. Removing our passage joins them together again. Three, notice “neither the churches of God.” It was the main purpose of Paul’s editors to make his highly specific church letters seem to have universal application, and this phrase, which implies all churches, not just Corinth, helps to accomplish that.

Recognizing the interpolation is merely a technical matter. Its importance for us is that it lets us see behind the text in our Bibles, to detect what of Paul’s letter is really Paul’s, and what later additions now jostle it, confusing our sense of what Paul himself was really like, and really said.

What it comes to is that female followers of Jesus should appear modestly, as the outside world is accustomed to judge modesty; and appropriately, as that world defines appropriateness. It does not limit membership, or forbid women to prophesy. It does present a more conventional face to the outside world.

This is not the only passage about the role of women. A few, like this one, were added to Paul’s letters. Others figure in the letters written after Paul, and claiming his authority, but actually written by Paul’s associates.¹

The theological compromise, the “both-and” stance which Paul’s editors created toward Alpha and Beta in these additions to Pauline tradition, held for only a little while; that compromise would later come apart. The diminution of the role of women caused no such rupture; it seems to have been accepted in the mainstream (though texts featuring women as major figures did appear in the popular tradition).

Of more concern in the mainstream tradition was the challenge of theories offering a different, and more magical, account of salvation itself.

¹For detailed help in identifying them, see Collins **Letters**.