

# ON DISCERNING THE BODY AND ACKNOWLEDGING THE HEAD: Notes on 1 Corinthians 11

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**T**HE ELEVENTH CHAPTER of St Paul's letter to the church at Corinth raises profound questions concerning the nature and purpose of Christian worship, and the proper relationship of the Church to the world. The depth of Paul's thought can easily be missed, as can an appreciation of the difficulties that he poses for the formation of Christian liturgy. When confronted with such an opaque piece of writing, it is tempting to think that we must either follow Paul's instructions to the letter, or else dismiss completely the authority of the bible for the contemporary Church. For this reason, I begin by leaving open the possibility that Paul's words might have continuing significance for modern Christians; but I do not assume that the incorporation of a text into holy scripture renders that text incontrovertible.

Throughout chapter 11—that is, when discussing both the veiling of women and the manner of conduct at the Lord's Supper—Paul's concern is with the unity and ordering of the Christian community in worship. This is a subject which has received a great deal of attention in the Churches over the last twenty-five years, and a consideration of Paul's understanding of the matter will provide further food for thought as Christians try to create liturgies which can be welcomed by the Church in the late twentieth century. That the Epistles can continue to provide this kind of stimulation is made possible by the fact that Paul's teaching is related not only to the immediate needs of the congregation in Corinth, but also to fundamental principles regarding the universal significance of the Church's actions. Therefore, rather than speculating upon all the possible circumstances pertaining to the first-century Corinthian

church, my primary intention here is to clarify some of these deeper principles upon which Paul bases his instruction.

A helpful place to begin this process of clarification is with a consideration of some aspects of Paul's ecclesiology, since it is his understanding of the nature of the church which lays the foundation for his teaching on the conduct of Christian worship.

In particular, it is essential to grasp the fact that Paul sees the church as being ontologically quite distinct from the world, and that he wants this distinction to be realized on a practical level. This is seen in some of the advice that he gives the Corinthians concerning marriage (1 Cor 7,32-35). Here, Paul states: 'The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided'. And Paul follows this with a similar consideration regarding the married and unmarried woman, the former being concerned with 'worldly affairs' and the latter with 'the affairs of the Lord'. He thus views 'the affairs of the Lord' as quite distinct from 'worldly affairs', even when the latter are legitimate and righteous dealings with one's fellows, as is the case in marriage. This does not necessarily imply that the responsibilities of marriage, or any other worldly affairs, are intrinsically antagonistic to living a devout life. Rather, the tension between these things is due to the exceptional conditions of the age in which the church is living. Paul characterizes this age as one of 'distress' (v 26), and says that 'the appointed time has grown very short' (v 29), and 'the form of this world is passing away' (v 31) in readiness for the end time, when the present order of the universe will be destroyed, and all things will become subject to God the Father (15,21-28). Under these circumstances, it is best for Christians to devote themselves single-mindedly to preparation for the impending transformation of the universe. This means that all other concerns take on the character of being distractions from the most important business of Christian life, and hence are better avoided.

However, a more rigid expression of the distinction between the church and the world is found earlier on in 1 Corinthians, when Paul addresses the issue of how to deal with wrong-doers within the Christian community. He instructs the Corinthians to drive out of their church anyone who is guilty of certain habitual sins (1 Cor 5,9-13). Paul acknowledges that since the Christian community is present in a world in which there are robbers,

idolators and so on, it is not possible for members of the church to avoid contact with such people altogether (vv 9-10). But this is not a reason for allowing those people to be tolerated as church members themselves: they should be expelled. Nonetheless, the church's authority to pass judgement does not extend beyond its own boundaries. For Paul states that although Christians have authority to judge people who are inside the church (v 12), it is God himself who will judge those who are outside (v 13). Moreover, it is not only that Christians are not to pass judgement on non-Christians, but neither, in turn, are Christians to subject themselves to judgement by non-Christian authorities. For Paul goes on to state that eventually 'the saints will judge the world' (6,2), and tells them that if their judgement is to be competent for this ultimate act of assessment, then it must be possible for them to resolve the unimportant disagreements that arise amongst themselves. Therefore, they should not go to law before unbelievers (6,1-6).

Paul's two principal instructions here—on the one hand, to solve all disputes internally, and on the other, to expel unworthy members from the community—serve to maintain both the distinctiveness and the cohesiveness of the group concerned. However, Paul's concern is not simply for the social welfare of Corinthian Christians; on the contrary, Paul sees the church primarily in terms of its eschatological significance. For the fact that it is church members who are destined to judge the world indicates that the radical separation of church and world is not something which exists merely as an expedient for the present time, but rather, that it is literally of cosmic importance.

Nevertheless, the vocation to be judges of the world is not to be realized before the appointed time, as is indicated by Paul's earlier insistence that the Christian community has no authority to pass judgement upon those who are outside its own membership. This is symptomatic of the fact that the church exists in a kind of interim condition: its members are no longer a part of the world, although they necessarily continue to live in it and to have dealings with it. But neither have they yet attained the final state of resurrection to eternal life—a state which will come about only when the whole universe, including Christ himself, is subjected to God (15,20-28). The Christian community has thus been taken out of the world in preparation for the time of judgement and resurrection.

Now, although the church has not already attained that final glory towards which the whole universe is moving, this does not mean that the church is of no immediate benefit for its members. On the contrary, Paul regards the church's separation from the world as being one aspect of its participation in a condition which is greatly superior to that of the world. This condition was rightly characterized by Albert Schweitzer as 'being-in-Christ'.<sup>1</sup> The union with God which will come at the end of time has not yet been realized, and this is why Paul says that all things are 'from him and through him and to him' (Rom 11,36), but not actually *in* him.<sup>2</sup> However, although nobody is yet 'in God', Christians are already 'in Christ'; and although the present order of creation has not yet reached its final dissolution, being-in-Christ is a condition in which the ordinary boundaries of social convention are transcended in mystical union—union with Christ himself and with all the saints who are also 'in Christ'. This is expressed in Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he writes: 'For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (3,27-28).

It is important to realize here that Paul is not constructing a vision of social revolution; he is describing the mystical experience of liberation in Christ, and he is explaining the ontological status of church members. A Christian's ontological status of equality with other Christians is something which pertains in spite of his or her social status, the latter undoubtedly placing the person in a position of inequality with regard to at least some other members of the Christian community. And Paul nowhere suggests that this ontological equality ought to be translated into terms of social reality. Quite the opposite, as he makes clear in 1 Corinthians, where he recommends that 'every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him' (7,17). This means that church members should continue in the social state that they occupied when they first became Christians: 'Were you a slave when called? Never mind. . . . For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ' (7,21-22).

Church members thus have a unity in Christ which transcends, but does not abolish, the divisions of the world. The abolition of those divisions will come at the end, when all things are subjected to God.

The church's liturgy, therefore, must be worship which is appropriate to a community which lives its life in Christ, and in separation from the world, but which has not yet experienced the final dissolution of either earthly or angelic powers. I wish to show how this particular understanding of the church's condition can account for a number of aspects of Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 11.

To begin with, then, let us look at the injunctions concerning the celebration of the Lord's Supper (vv 17-34). Paul has heard that there are divisions within the church at Corinth (v 18), and in particular, that the meal which they eat together 'is not the Lord's Supper' (v 20), since they do not share food and drink with one another, but eat their own meals, so that the rich are over-indulged and the poor go without (vv 21-22). It is tempting to think that Paul's objection to this state of affairs is on the grounds of social justice—that he thinks there should be a more equitable distribution of resources amongst the church's members. And this indeed is the interpretation placed upon the text by a number of modern commentators. William Orr and James Walther, for example, write that what 'occupies Paul's attention at this point . . . [is] the selfish indifference of each person or family to the needs and situation of the deprived and poor'.<sup>3</sup> However, this understanding of Paul's intention is not at all borne out by the text itself. If Paul really wanted to impress upon the rich the need for them to share their goods with the rest of the community, he would presumably have told them to do just that. But, as Hans Conzelman points out, the one thing that is *not* demanded in this passage is that the poorer members of the community should be fed as well!<sup>4</sup>

If the Corinthian Christians want to eat meals to satisfy their hunger and to enjoy themselves, then, Paul says, they should do so in their own homes (vv 22, 34), for this is not the purpose of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is a participation in the body and blood of Christ (10,16; 11,24-25); and Paul's objection to the Corinthian practice is not that it perpetuates social injustice, but that it fails to be either a faithful rendering of the Lord's actions and instructions, or an appropriate expression of the nature of Christ's church. This church is, as I have already explained, united in Christ but separated from the world. And that is why on the one hand, Paul insists that the church's liturgy should express the unity of its participants, but on the other hand does

not take this as an opportunity to condemn the social and economic divisions which exist amongst church members. For Paul, the central failing of the Corinthian Christians' celebration of the Lord's Supper is that they fail to 'discern the body' (vv 29-30). That is to say, they do not discriminate between participating in the body of Christ and eating any other meal. The importance of this failure lies in the vocation and identity of the church itself, and the role played by the Lord's Supper in sustaining this identity. We have already seen that Paul regards the vocation of the church as an eschatological one, and he now indicates that the church, which is separated from the world in preparation for its end, has a meal which is peculiar to this condition: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (v 26). But the bread and the cup are not simply an act of proclamation, because the church of Christ is his very body until his second coming (12,27), and the participation of church members in the body and blood of Christ is both signified and actualized in the partaking of the Lord's Supper. Therefore, if the Lord's Supper is characterized by division rather than unity, then it is the church itself which is threatened, and the body of Christ which is defiled.

Furthermore, the directions for the proper celebration of the supper were 'received from the Lord' (11,23). This guarantees the validity and reinforces the weight of Paul's censure of the Corinthian church's communion. Failure in the proper observance of the Lord's Supper is both a profanity against Christ's body and a contravention of his word. For these reasons, Paul says that whoever 'eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord' (v 27), and 'any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement upon himself' (v 29).

The metaphor of the body and its parts is an important aspect of Paul's thought concerning the church and its relationship to God. The most extensive use of the image is found in 1 Corinthians 12,14-30, where Paul again uses it in the context of an invocation to unity amongst church members. He points out that for a body to be complete, it must be made up of many organs, each performing a different function, so that each part is indispensable to the whole. It would be absurd for one part to complain that it was in some sense less a part of the body than some other part;

rather, the parts live together harmoniously and with care for one another. Paul urges the Corinthians to view the church in this way, as the body of Christ, with individual members contributing to the whole in their different ways, as do parts of a body.

The metaphor of the body of Christ is developed further in Colossians and Ephesians (which were probably not written by Paul), where it is said that Christ is the head of the body, which is the church (Col 1,18; Eph 5,23). In Ephesians, furthermore, the relationship of head to body, which Christ has to the church, is made a simile for the relationship of husband to wife. Wives, therefore, are to be subject to their husbands (5,24).

This teaching on the relationship between husband and wife is not found at all in 1 Corinthians. On the contrary, Paul's instructions on the personal conduct of husbands and wives towards one another is strictly even-handed (7,1-16): every duty which applies to either one of the partners applies equally to the other. However, the situation is different with regard to conduct in worship, where Paul is quite clear in affirming the headship of the man over the woman (11,3), and in asserting that this state of affairs should be expressed in their respective clothing, women being required to veil their heads, and men to leave their heads bare (vv 6-7).

So what is the reason for the apparent discrepancy between Paul's instruction to married couples and, in the same letter, his teaching on the significance of gender in the context of worship? In order to answer this question, it is helpful to compare this issue with Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper, which immediately follows the passage on gender. It has already been pointed out that Paul views the Lord's Supper as a meal which is quite distinct from an ordinary meal of the kind which people eat in their houses, and I want to suggest that, in a similar manner, Paul sees other aspects of Christian worship also as being of such a kind that they are governed by a different set of rules from those which order people's daily lives. Hence, the principles and conventions which can be drawn upon when advising married couples on the conduct of their relationships do not have any bearing on the respective conduct of men and women in worship.

In the case of the Lord's Supper, Paul argues that whereas meals at home are for nourishment and enjoyment, the common meal of the church is carried out in observance of the Lord's instructions and for the maintenance of the church's identity in Christ. In the case of equality or subordination between the sexes, Paul similarly

makes a distinction between, on the one hand, the mundane ordering of Christian marriage, which is for the unity and harmony of the couples involved and of the community as a whole and, on the other hand, the clothing of the two sexes in divine worship which, like the Lord's Supper, has very little to do with social relationships, but which ought to reflect the mystical or angelic ordering of creation, in accordance with the will of God.

Paul's precise reasoning in this passage (1 Cor 11,2-16) is not at all clear within the text itself. Indeed, it almost seems comical. This is because although Paul's argument is based upon an appeal to a particular theology of creation, he nonetheless fails to give a proper account of the content of that theology!<sup>5</sup> As Conzelman explains, 'what matters to Paul is not a theoretic development of the argument—this is only a means to his end—but carefully-aimed paraenesis addressed to specific persons'.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this article, however, it is important to come to an understanding of the 'theoretic' aspect of Paul's instruction, and so it will be necessary to look beyond the text itself, to try to fill in some of the gaps which Paul leaves.

Paul is evidently confronted with a situation in which women of the church at Corinth have been praying or prophesying with their heads uncovered. He is greatly concerned that they should veil themselves, and provides a number of arguments in support of his view. Fundamentally, these arguments boil down to a particular conception of a divinely-ordained hierarchy in creation.

Paul's reasoning begins with the assertion that 'the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God' (v 3). This gives us the hierarchical ordering of God—Christ—Man—Woman. The use of the word 'head' here is not accidental, since the next sentence tells us that a man should pray or prophesy with his head uncovered (v 4), whilst 'any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonours her head' (v 5). The statement that a woman whose head is unveiled dishonours her head is clearly a pun on the use of the word 'head': it is also the husband who is dishonoured. For a woman to have her head uncovered implies that she is her own head, and is not deferring to male authority.

It is sometimes suggested that Paul's underlying motive for the demand that women should be veiled is a concern that the unveiled woman might be mistaken for a prostitute, thereby bringing disrepute to the Christian community.<sup>7</sup> It is certainly the case that



in some ancient Near Eastern societies, to be veiled was a mark of the 'respectable' woman, and to be unveiled was a sign that a woman was a prostitute or something similar.<sup>8</sup> If this implication is indeed Paul's concern, then it is hard to see why he does not say so in as many words. However, even if we allow that the concern for respectability is truly what is at the back of his mind, the implication of his attitude is nonetheless that every woman should be seen to be subordinate to a man. This is because the meaning of a woman being compulsorily veiled is precisely that she is under a man's authority: the reason why a prostitute does not wear a veil is that she is not under such authority. The woman who lives in the household of her husband or father is subordinate to him, she is regarded as 'respectable', and she wears a veil. The woman who lives apart from the authority of a husband or male relative is not regarded as 'respectable', and she does not wear a veil. This indicates that what it means for a woman to be 'respectable' is that she is in a social position of subordination to a man, and the veil is simultaneously the sign of her subordination and the mark of her 'respectability'. Indeed, we can go further than this and say that in general, wherever there are rules which require certain women to wear a veil, or forbid other women from doing so, then the significance of the veil is that its wearer is under the authority of a man.<sup>9</sup>

We have already seen that Paul shows no interest in this kind of regulation when giving practical advice to married couples. It is only in the context of conduct in worship that he appeals to a concept of female subordination and the symbols associated with it. This seems to be because Paul regards Christian worship as expressing certain deep truths about humanity's relationship to God, which are not directly applicable to the ordinary social world.

Paul's rationale for his instruction that a man's head should be uncovered whilst a woman's should be veiled seems to seek its legitimation in an interpretation of the Genesis creation narratives. He tells us that man 'is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man' (vv 7-9). Paul thus understands the 'man' (Heb. *adam*; Gk. *anthrōpos*) created in God's image in Genesis 1,27, to be a specifically male human being, from whose side the woman was formed in order to be his helper (Gen 2,20-22). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out that Paul's claim that 'woman is the glory of

man' does not deny the possibility that she is also 'the image and glory of God'.<sup>10</sup> But Paul clearly intends to draw a contrast between the status of the man and that of the woman in this regard (the English word 'but' translates the Greek particles *men . . . de*), and Conzelman argues that the word 'glory' (*doxa*) corresponds here with 'image' (*eikōn*), thus giving it the meaning 'reflection'<sup>11</sup>: the man reflects God, and the woman reflects the man. This hierarchy of 'reflection' complements and comments upon the hierarchy of headship which has already been established. This is the theoretical justification for the symbolic subordination of women in the wearing of the veil.

However, Paul's understanding of the relationship between man and woman is more complex than this. For he continues thus: nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman is from man [*hē gunē ek tou andros*], so also man is through woman [*ho anēr dia tēs gunaikos*]. And all things are from God (vv 11-12). An insensitively prosaic reading of this text might lead one to think that the phrase 'man is through woman' signifies solely the fact that man's physical birth is from woman.<sup>12</sup> And this is certainly one nuance of its meaning. However, the fact that Paul does not state this in as many words, but uses a far more enigmatic turn of phrase, indicates that the reader should not be constrained to think in terms of this single interpretation. The statement that the interdependence of man and woman is 'in the Lord' points us in the direction of a more mystical interpretation, and suggests that the being which man attains through woman is of a spiritual kind—as though it is through woman that man becomes most truly himself. This reading would accord with the story of the creation of man and woman in Genesis 2, 21-23, where the Hebrew word for man (*ish* = male human being) is not used until the point at which woman is created. In verse 23, the words 'man' and 'woman' are introduced together. One possible interpretation of this is that Adam's manhood is realized only in relation to womanhood—that man needs woman for his very self-definition. For Paul, then, woman is created from man in order that, through her, man can come to be fully himself. She is 'from' him and 'for' him, and he is 'through' her. This is a complementarity of male and female which does nothing to undermine the subordination of the woman to the man, since although each is necessary for the existence of the other, she is brought into being for his benefit, and not he for hers.

Paul's view that woman is 'from' man and 'for' him, whilst man is 'through' woman, gains further interest when it is seen that Paul uses almost identical language to this when speaking of the relationship of creation to God the Father and to Jesus Christ, respectively. In 1 Corinthians 8,6, Paul writes: 'For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom are we [*hēmeis eis auton*], and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom are we [*hēmeis di' autou*]' . That is to say, the relationship of woman to man ('from' him and 'for' him) is analagous to the relationship of creation to God the Father,<sup>13</sup> whilst the relationship of man to woman ('through' her) is analogous to the relationship of creation to Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> And this similarity of language might not be merely accidental, but might point us to the intellectual background from which a certain amount of Paul's thought is derived.

Paul sees God and man (= male) in terms of origins and destinies ('from' him and 'for' him); and he sees Christ and woman in terms of channels or instruments of transformation ('through' him/her). Now Paul has earlier referred to Christ as 'our wisdom' (1, 30); but in the Jewish Hellenistic Wisdom tradition, Wisdom was always depicted as feminine, and I suggest that Paul's teaching on the mystical significance of male and female in creation derives from this very tradition. Paul has made Wisdom masculine, in Christ, and applies the principle of complementarity of the sexes only to the realm of the human, and not the divine; but the language in which he speaks of both these things is still redolent of the Wisdom writers, and indicates that his conceptualization is influenced by theirs.

The Wisdom of Solomon, for example, tells us that Wisdom is 'a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty . . . a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness' (7, 25-26). The words 'glory', 'reflection' and 'image' immediately call to mind Paul's words concerning man as the glory of God, and woman the glory of man. In the immediate centuries before Christ, the Wisdom tradition became increasingly close to Greek Platonism,<sup>15</sup> with Wisdom becoming identified with the 'world soul'. The world soul had already come to be seen—in Hengel's words—as a feminine, inferior second principle alongside 'Zeus', 'God the Father',<sup>16</sup> and so Wisdom took on this character as well. Wisdom mysticism was continued in Christian Platonism, and the imagery of *reflection* and *mirror* came

to feature quite prominently in this tradition, not least because the physical universe was understood as the reflection of a divine reality.<sup>17</sup> But it is also the case that the neo-Platonic conception of human consciousness included the notion of reflection as central to it.<sup>18</sup> According to this understanding, the process by which consciousness comes about is that initially unselfconscious action is reflected back in the mind of the actor, so that the actor is thereby made aware of his or her action. This awareness then forms the basis for future action, and then further reflection, and so on. Consciousness—which in this case means self-awareness—thus arises through reflection. Perhaps, then, when Paul suggested both that ‘man is through woman’ and also that ‘woman is the glory of man’, he was echoing a school of thought which saw one’s ‘glory’, or *reflection*, as being the means by which one came to self-awareness. This would have been a school of thought which, moreover, when speaking of God, associated the initial action with that which is masculine, in the person of God the creator, and the reflection with that which is feminine, in the person of holy Wisdom, which is the aspect of God through whom he realizes his creation.

The transference of this divine imagery to the human realm of Adam and Eve was carried out explicitly by some mediaeval writers, who saw Eve as Adam’s reflection;<sup>19</sup> but it seems already to be incipient in 1 Corinthians 11. And if we allow ourselves the luxury of a little eisegesis, and read this interpretation into Paul’s letter, then it certainly helps to give coherence to an otherwise disjointed text! Paul makes Christ perform the role of Wisdom in creation (‘through whom are all things’), and transfers the gender imagery to the realm of the human: the woman *reflects* the man, so that he comes to be ‘through’ her.

There are two further phrases whose meaning is not altogether clear, but which might also be elucidated by reference to the Wisdom tradition. In verse 10, Paul writes: ‘a woman ought to have (an) authority over her head [*exousian echein epi tes kephales*], because of the angels’. The use of the word ‘authority’ here evidently refers to the covering of the woman’s head, and I have already pointed out that the compulsory veiling of a woman is generally a sign of her subordination to male authority. The reference to angels, however, seems curious. But in the light of Paul’s other use of Wisdom language, the whole verse is evocative of a particular drama which occurs in some of the Gnostic traditions. This is the drama of the

'fallen Sophia', which is an account of the creation of the physical universe.<sup>20</sup> According to this story, Sophia (Wisdom) was created a spiritual being with a male consort. However, through following her own passion, she became separated from her consort and the rest of the heavenly beings, and contravened the intention of the Father who had created her. She was eventually returned to her consort and to her proper place in the heavenly hierarchy, but her wayward emotions were left behind. Thus, out of her own passion, she had generated a formless being, which was separated from the heavenly hierarchy. And ultimately, the physical world was created out of the emotions of the fallen Sophia.

This account retains the role of Wisdom as an agent in the creation of the universe. But unlike the Hebrew tradition, the Gnostic teaching takes a disparaging view of the physical world, looking always for a return to the realm of pure spirit. Therefore, where the Jewish writers present a picture of holy Wisdom participating in the creation of an essentially good cosmos, the Gnostic writers see Wisdom as a wayward figure who gives birth to a wicked universe. The ground for this concept of a 'bad' rather than a 'good' Sophia, had been laid long before the Gnosticism of the first few centuries C.E. As Martin Hengel points out: 'As Plato, among others, also considers the possibility of an evil world-soul (*Laws* 896e-897d), there is also the possibility of a fall of Sophia'.<sup>21</sup> This is because of the identification of the world-soul with Wisdom.

The story of the fall of Sophia and its consequences seems to express a fear of independent female action which is manifested also in Paul's instruction that women's heads should be covered. It is the female who has broken free of male authority who presents a threat to order and hierarchy. For Paul, though, unlike the Gnostics, God's creation is fundamentally good, and it is enacted not through the female figure of Wisdom, but through the male figure of Christ. But Paul retains the fear of female insubordination and transfers it to the realm of human action, so that it is not heavenly spirits but real women who must carry a sign of female subordination to male authority. However, this sign of subordination is very restricted in its application. For Paul does not say that wives must veil themselves in the presence of men; and neither does he say that Christian women must always veil themselves in public; it is only in acts of worship that the veil must be worn. And this surely indicates the precise nature of Paul's concern: he

is not at all bothered about wayward wives; rather, his anxiety has regard to the fundamental ordering of the universe. For Christian worship is sacred action which in some sense participates in the cosmic order. So just as the church which is the body of Christ must be properly constituted in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, so also the church in prayer and prophecy must harmonize with the mystical order of the cosmos. This order will come to an end [only] when Christ destroys 'every rule and every authority and power', and 'delivers the kingdom to God the Father' (1 Cor 15, 24). In the meantime, the subordination of woman to man is an aspect of the divinely given order, and must therefore not be contravened in Christian worship. The guardians of this order are the angelic powers, and that is why it is they who are cited as the reason for women bearing a sign of authority upon their heads.

Paul obviously anticipates that his readers might not be persuaded by his argument thus far, since he reinforces it with an appeal to 'nature', apparently on the grounds that nature manifests the divine will (cf Rom 1, 23-27). He contends that nature teaches that women should wear their hair long, thus indicating that it is appropriate for women's heads to be covered (vv 14-15).<sup>22</sup> However, Paul is either not convinced by his own arguments, or else anticipates resistance for some other reason, since he concludes his discourse by baldly asserting his refusal to recognize any other practice, and then backing this up with an appeal to the practice of the other churches (v 16).

Whatever the reaction of the Corinthian church to Paul's letter, most modern readers will not be convinced by his arguments in support of the necessity for women to cover their heads during congregational prayer. But setting aside the details of this particular issue, we must acknowledge that 1 Corinthians 11 raises some questions of fundamental importance concerning the nature and function of Christian worship.

In the first place, Paul assumes that the church is separate from the world, which means that its corporate prayer is not concerned with social, political and economic affairs, either actual or ideal. On the other hand, the kingdom of God has not yet been realized; and this means that the church is not able to express the perfect conditions which will pertain after the end time, but must assist in the guardianship of the existing cosmic order. The church thus occupies a kind of interim space between the world and the kingdom of God, which corresponds to the interim time between the death

and resurrection of Christ and his second coming. These are the circumstances which determine the form taken by the liturgy of Paul's church.

There is a sense in which this remains the position occupied by the Christian Church. Its goals and values are still different from those of the social world in which it exists. It continues to live as the body of Christ in a world in which the kingdom of God has not yet been fully realized. But unlike Paul, we might want to state that the Church not only waits expectantly for the advent of God's kingdom, but that it must also be an agent in bringing about the kingdom on earth.

If this is indeed our view of the Church, then we must ask what effect this will have on the Church's liturgical forms. It is of course impossible to construct any representation of God's kingdom, and it is idolatrous to claim that some particular liturgical form succeeds in doing this. But we can at least state that there are some institutions and modes of behaviour which are decidedly *not* of the kingdom, and we can try to create liturgical activity which will challenge or undermine such institutions and modes of behaviour.

This will give us a liturgy which in certain respects will be very different from that favoured by St Paul. Paul recognized that the hierarchical cosmos in which he believed was destined to be overthrown at the inauguration of the kingdom of God. But he regarded the task of the church to be one of waiting in readiness for the kingdom, rather than actively building it, and hence he saw the interim role of Christian worship in terms of the maintenance of the existing cosmic order. However, if we adopt an attitude of more active anticipation of the kingdom, then we might begin to enact our worship in a manner that looks beyond present realities, and thereby reveals their temporary nature and opens up the vision of a completely different kind of universe.

Now since, with Paul, we acknowledge that all forms of hierarchy will eventually pass away, and if we wish the liturgy of the Church to point forward to the coming of God's kingdom, then it follows that Christian worship must also abandon hierarchical structures.

Indeed, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians implicitly demonstrates the unsatisfactory nature of hierarchical organization as applied to the church at even the present time. As we have seen, Paul tries to reinforce a cohesive division of labour by appealing predominantly to the metaphor of the human body, which has complementary parts. But unlike the parts of a body, which do

not have consciousness and thus cannot question or alter their function, men and women are intelligent beings with ideas of their own on how they should act, both individually and corporately. If the Church were fully analogous to a human body, then Paul's appeal to the Corinthians would be ridiculous, since no hand, foot, ear or eye would ever think of performing any function other than its own, and hence there would be no need to call it into line! As it is, human beings are obviously better suited to a form of organization which respects the full creativity of all concerned.

Similarly, Paul's claim that the man is the head of the woman demonstrates the extent to which women are perfectly capable of holding authority in their own right: for if this were not the case, and women were 'naturally' subordinate to men, then it would have been unnecessary for Paul to raise the issue at all. Indeed, the very length and convolution of his arguments show that he knew he was on extremely weak ground.

Paul's doctrine of the church produces questionable consequences not only for his ruling on the veiling of women in worship, but also for his teaching on the Lord's Supper. His desire not to interfere with existing social conditions, but simply to minimize the church's involvement with them, leads him to show no concern that the resources of church members should be more equitably distributed. Here again, if we espouse an ecclesiology which accords the Church a more dynamic role in the inauguration of the kingdom, then we cannot tolerate such a level of indifference to actual injustice. For the shared meal is not only a memorial of the past and a promise for the future: it is also a pointer to the manner in which we should already be ordering our affairs. This means that those who share together in the Lord's communion must also be expressing the mutual care and equality of that communion in their daily lives together. It is failure to live in such a manner which truly renders the individual Christian unworthy to participate in the bread and the cup.

We must indeed discern the body, and we must also acknowledge its only head, who is God. But this is a body in which the whole is entirely present in each of its parts; and it is this truth which must be assumed and manifested in acts of Christian worship.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Schweitzer, Albert: *The mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (Seabury Press: New York, 1968), p 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 12.



<sup>3</sup> Orr, F William and Walther, James Arthur: *I Corinthians* (Doubleday: New York, 1976), p 270.

<sup>4</sup> Conzelman Hans: *1 Corinthians* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1975), p 195.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 184.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Most commentaries allude to this. But Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*In memory of her* (SCM Press: London, 1983), pp 227-228) suggests that the issue is more one of concern for differentiation from pagan practices.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Gerda Lerner's discussion of the Middle Assyrian Law on the subject in *The creation of patriarchy* (Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford, 1986), pp 134-138.

<sup>9</sup> The story of Judah and Tamar indicates that at some stage of Israel's history, it had been customary for prostitutes to be veiled (Gen 38, 14-15). However, it seems that it was also common in the Ancient Near East for a woman to be veiled as part of the marriage ceremony (Lerner, *op. cit.*, p 256), and there are representations of women naked apart from the veil, Pritchard, J. B., *The ancient Near East in pictures* (Princeton; 1954), p 69, 222.

The weight of this evidence taken together suggests that the veil was associated with sexual intercourse. Under patriarchal conditions, heterosexual intercourse generally entails the subordination of the woman to the man; thus, even if the veiling of women had its origins in non-patriarchal conditions, it is easy to see how the wearing of the veil could subsequently have developed the connotation of female subjection to male power.

<sup>10</sup> Fiorenza, *op. cit.*, p 229.

<sup>11</sup> Conzelman, *op. cit.*, p 187.

<sup>12</sup> The Revised Standard Version Bible interprets this verse with the translation: 'For as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman'. A more accurate rendering is that given by the Revised English Bible: 'If woman was made out of man, it is through woman that man now comes to be'.

<sup>13</sup> The Greek word translated as 'for' is different in the two cases. In 8, 6 it is *eis* + acc., and in 11, 9, *dia* + acc. Since Paul believes that all things—which must include woman—are ultimately for God, it is not inappropriate that a stronger term should be used when speaking of creation's existence for God, and a weaker one when speaking of woman's existence for man.

However, my claim is not that Paul is constructing deliberate parallels between the two conditions, but that an analogous structure of relationship is implicit in his understanding of the two hierarchies concerned.

<sup>14</sup> Paul's theology would also hold that there is a parallel between the relationship of man to woman, and vice versa, and that of God and Christ to one another. For Christ is *from* God and *for* him, whilst God creates and communicates with the world *through* Christ.

<sup>15</sup> Hengel, Martin: *Judaism and Hellenism*, two vols (SCM Press: London, 1974), p 163.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* The origin and function of the world soul is expounded by Plato in the *Timaeus* (Heinemann: London, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Several references to neo-Platonic writings on the theme of reflections are included in Newman, Barbara: *Sister of Wisdom* (Scolar Press: Aldershot, 1987) p 51.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Plotinus: *Ennead* I.iv.10 translated by Stephen Mackenna (Faber: London, 1956), pp 48-49. A modern meditation on this theme is to be found in the anonymous work *Meditations on the Tarot* (Amity House: New York, 1985), pp 29-49. Hegel's *Jena Lectures* (ed Leo Rauch; Detroit University Press: Detroit, Mi., 1983) offer a somewhat similar philosophy of consciousness.

<sup>19</sup> Newman, *op. cit.*, p 96.

<sup>20</sup> This story occurs in more than one version. See Jonas, Hans: *The Gnostic religion* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1965), pp 174-205; also 'The Apocryphon of John' in James M. Robinson (ed): *The Nag Hammadi Library* (E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1984), pp 98-116.

<sup>21</sup> Hengel, *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Conzelman, *op. cit.*, p 190.