

SYNERGOI

For we are GOD'S Fellow Workers... (1 Cor 3:9)

θεου' γὰρ ἔσμεν συνεργοὶ

A LETTER FOR LEADERS

**PUBLISHED BY THE DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT
OF THE EVANGELICAL MISSIONARY CHURCH
CANADA EAST DISTRICT - www.emccd.ca**



DSeL021206 [Dec 6, 2002]

Of Headship and 1 Corinthians Eleven – Part I [Article #3]

This is a study on the matter of “Headship” in the Scriptures. This is the third part in a series that seeks to bring light, not heat, to the discussion. I am interacting in some measure with the perspectives presented by Gordon Fee, a fine scholar and fellow evangelical who is known as an advocate for “biblical equality.” The views he represents deserve to be considered seriously.

Background

I like what Fee has done with the background of both 1 Cor 11 and 1 Tim 2. What I find helpful in Fee’s treatment is the strong statement that he makes that Paul is speaking of disorder in the church, disorder that is theologically rooted. In the case of 1 Cor 11, Fee grounds his argument in an appreciation that there is a denial or a blurring of gender. Certainly some of the Corinthians had adopted an over realized eschatology – “we have already arrived!” -- that led to such things as sexual abstinence within marriage – “like the angels”-- (chapter 7), advocating divorce (chapter 7) apparently to escape the fleshly, denying that what one did with one’s body mattered (chapter 5), teaching that the resurrection had already taken place (chapter 15), identifying the evidence of spirituality as ecstatic speech – the speech of angels -- (chapters 12-14).

One of the intriguing suggestions that Fee makes is that the women were prophesying in the fashion of the mystery cults with their hair down (perhaps the meaning of the word translated “uncovered”), swaying back and forth in ecstasy. If this is so it might be well to read chapters 10 to 14 as a block in which there is still too much of the pagan in worship among the Christian converts of Corinth. Chapter 10 contains a warning about dining with demons, chapter 11 a warning about prophesying idolatrously, chapter 12 a warning against the view that prophesying delivered in the pagan fashion, as impressive as it may appear, makes one spiritual, and chapter 14 is full of particular teaching to control the use of ecstatic speech that was a well known phenomenon of the pagan oracles.

Treatment of the 1 Corinthians 11 text

Fee is certainly aware of the problem as it appears in 1 Cor 11 and set it out well.

It is that women in the exercise of their gifts must honour the good order that God has established in creation.

It is that the manner in which some women were so prophesying and praying was bringing disrepute to and within the nascent church. There was disorder and therefore disrepute.

It is not that women cannot exercise gifts, even gifts that are exercised in public [in the presence of men and women], such gifts as prophesying and praying.

It is not that women do not have standing before God.

It is clear that the women in Corinth were prophesying and praying in the presence of both men and women. This is not about whether women can minister in public. It is about ministering in public in a way that brings no disrepute.

These women were already “in ministry.” These women were preaching, the single most authoritative role of Christian ministry. They were exercising notable, conspicuous influence. And this by definition means that they were leading.

This passage does not tell us anything DIRECTLY AND EXPLICITLY about the “hot button” issues that appear to be resurging in the North American evangelical church, that is, ordination of women as perhaps the hottest one, women as elders perhaps second.

What Fee does not address very sharply is that Paul, in his admonition, uses a line of argumentation in calling these women ministers to order that he never uses when calling men ministers to order. How does saying that the man is the head of the woman set out a remedy to the disorderly conduct of the women in ministry of Corinth? How can this have any cogency in the situation unless Paul and the Corinthians share a view that the order of creation has a defining effect on the nature of manhood and womanhood, and therefore on the conduct of men and women? Whatever one argues about the meaning of “head” in this passage, Paul obviously believes that saying “the man is the head of the woman” must have a corrective bearing on the behaviour of the women concerned.

Moreover, Paul tells us in vv 7-9 himself what he understands “head” to mean:

1Cor. 11:7 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.

1Cor. 11:8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man;

1Cor. 11:9 neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.

To paraphrase, the woman is the glory of man, that is to say, the woman reflects the man, since the woman comes from the man, and was created for the man. Paul is arguing primacy of the man. Primacy, the right of first place, belongs to the man and this ought to have an ordering influence on the disorderly public ministry of the women ministering.

This line of argumentation depends on hierarchy in the following sense: “a group of persons or things arranged in order of rank, grade, class, etc.” [Webster’s New World Dictionary, definition #4]. To be continued... Pastor Phil

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