

# **A Response to L. Birney's 'The Role of Women in the New Testament Church'**

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Leroy Birney shows us the necessity for looking again at the scriptures to discover how far the understanding of the church today relating to the role of women does in fact stem from the teaching of scripture itself, rather than from culturally determined presuppositions which fit what scripture says into an already decided framework. He argues well and positively that women should be playing a full part in prayer and prophecy within the worship of the church, pointing out the danger of using verses like 1 Cor.14:34, which is based on the law, to forbid something which the law itself does not forbid.

However, it seems to me that Birney himself makes certain assumptions within his paper that really require further investigation and I would like to discuss here just two of those assumptions; firstly the nature of the custom relating to head-covering, and secondly the meaning of headship as used in the new testament to describe the relation between man and woman, and the relationship of this term to authority and subjection.

## **I. Head covering**

It is very clear that in 1 Cor.11 that Paul, for whatever reasons, is supporting a difference in custom, relating to hair or headgear, between men and women when they pray and prophesy. It is possible that he is stressing that a woman should exercise her authority to pray and prophesy (v.10, cf. p.35 below) as a woman and not overturn the structure of creation as two sexes by seeking to imitate the men! Birney rather takes it for granted that the custom which Paul has in mind here is the wearing of a headcover or shawl that covers the hair but not the face. Therefore he concludes that women, when praying and prophesying in worship today, should wear a similar headcover.

However, it is by no means as easy as Birney makes it appear, to identify just what the custom is to which Paul refers. There are two primary difficulties. Firstly, we do not have any conclusive evidence as to what exactly were the customs of the time regarding headgear for

men and women, nor what symbolic significance, if any, was accorded to such customs. The evidence that we do have seems to indicate that there was a great variation in custom from region to region and also from town to country. Thus we can really only speculate as to the precise custom Paul had in mind for the Corinthians.

The second and more significant difficulty is the terminology which Paul himself uses. The only time that he uses a specific word that could be translated 'veil' or 'headcovering' occurs in v.15b where he says 'her hair is given to her *instead of* a covering.' To use 'for' or 'as' here, rather than 'instead of', as we are forced to do if we assume that the custom Paul is dealing with is the wearing of a head-covering, means that we must make a deliberate alteration in the normal use of the Greek word *anti*. The terms used elsewhere in the chapter are all various forms of the same rather obscure word which has some relation to the head, and includes the sense of hanging down, but does not necessarily relate to a headcover at all. Some scholars feel that it applies to a particular kind of hairstyle and others to the length of hair. Thus it is very difficult for us to come to any definite conclusion from the passage itself as to the nature of the customs to which Paul refers here.

It has been argued very convincingly,<sup>1</sup> that whatever the custom is, it cannot be seen as the wearing of a veil or a shawl on the head. There are several reasons for this, even apart from the statement in v.15 that her hair is given her instead of such a covering. Firstly, 1 Cor. 11 is not the only place where a woman's hair is mentioned in the new testament. 1 Tim.2:9, and 1 Pet.3:3 both give instructions that a woman is not to have braided hair. Remembering that 1 Tim.2:9 is clearly in the context of worship, surely instructions relating to hairstyle would be totally redundant if it were being taken for granted that all such women would have their heads covered anyway.

Secondly, as Birney acknowledges, this would mean that Paul was apparently giving strong theological reasons for making quite a distinct change in the Jewish worship customs for men. Surely such a distinct change would have been at least mentioned elsewhere. Paul himself often took part in synagogue worship — presumably with covered head; was this dishonouring? More serious is the fact that on occasion the old testament prescribes head-covering for men in worship; e.g., the high priest's turban in Lev.16. Thus we are forced to say, if Paul really is stressing the wearing of head-covering, for women but not for men, either that the old testament was prescribing a custom which was dishonouring — surely unthinkable — or that the coming of Christ introduced a new distinction between men and women based on a differing relation to God — surely equally

unthinkable if we remember that 'in Christ there is neither male nor female' (Gal.3:28).

As then, we are not at all sure of the custom to which Paul is referring, we must be very wary of insisting on a particular custom in our worship today. What seems clear is that if a man or a woman follow a custom which is, in their society, appropriate only to the other sex, then they are in one sense seeking to deny their own sex, and this is dishonouring both to themselves and to God. This applies as much in the church today as it did in the first-century Corinthian church. Paul makes it very clear by his quotations from Genesis that sexual differentiation is part of creation, and therefore he rejects a false identification of the sexes. A woman should worship, pray and prophesy as a woman, and a man should do so as a man.

## **II. Headship, authority and subjection**

Birney begins his work by identifying two principles relating to our understanding of the role of women in the new testament church. (a) In standing before God, women are equal with men. (b) The man is to be the head of the woman. He then uses these principles as the basis for his discussion and for his exegesis of the three key passages with which he deals.

It is clear that these two principles are present in scripture, but it is not good enough to assume as Birney does that their meaning is self-evident. As far as the second principle is concerned, one must recognise that to describe the man as 'head' of the woman is to use a metaphor. Before we apply the principle we must be very sure that we are using the metaphor in the way that Paul intended it to be used, and not assume that its significance in the first century is automatically going to be identical with its use in the twentieth century. One indication that care must be taken here is the fact that in the first century it was the heart and not the head that was seen as the source of thought and reason; the head was seen rather as the source of life.

It is certainly not self-evident that Birney is justified in using the sentence, 'Woman is to be subject to man' as completely synonymous with the sentence, 'The man is to be head of the woman'. If we are to use the principle of headship as a means of testing the interpretation of a passage, then we must make certain that our interpretation of the principle itself is correct. Let us look then, firstly at the background of the term 'head', and secondly at the way in which Paul uses the term to describe the relation between man and woman — or husband and wife.

### A. *What is meant by 'head'?*

The Hebrew word for head (*rosh*) can be used in a metaphorical sense as 'chief over' and thus it is possible that, as a Hebrew-speaker, Paul was thinking in terms of a relationship of authority and submission when he used the word 'head'. However, even in Hebrew, the main idea of *rosh* can be in terms of priority rather than of authority as such. In Greek, the word for head (*kephalē*) is not normally used in the sense of 'ruler', but it is sometimes used in the sense of 'source' — in much the same way as we might describe the source of a river as its head — taking up the idea of priority. Because of this, S. Bedale<sup>2</sup> argues that the meaning of 'head' is to be seen as primarily concerned with origin rather than with lordship. Chrysostom, writing in the third century, argues strongly that we should not see 'head' as used in 1 Cor.11 in terms of 'rule and subjection', feeling that we should rather "accept the notion of a perfect union and the first principle". That is, he feels the term is being used to stress the unity between head and body rather than any idea of rule, and again he takes up the idea of origin.

Since Paul was writing in Greek to the largely Gentile Greek-speakers at Corinth and Ephesus, it seems likely that if he did wish to imply the authority/submission relation by his use of the term 'head' — as, with his Hebrew background, would be possible — then he would make this clear in the context of the passages in which the term was used. If he did not do this, then his Greek-speaking readers would not have interpreted the term as having this implication.

### B. *Paul's teaching about headship*

We will consider then the two occasions on which Paul uses the word 'head' to describe the relation between men and women.

#### i) *1 Corinthians 11:3*

'But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God'. (The AV has here, '. . . the head of the woman is the man' and as the same word is used for 'woman' as for 'wife' it is impossible to tell which is correct.) Is there anything in the context of this passage to show that we should interpret the use of *kephalē* here as indicating an authority/submission relation? In fact the word for submission does not occur in this passage. The word for authority (*exousia*) does occur, in v.10: 'That is why a woman ought to have authority on her head'. (The AV has 'power'. There is no foundation whatsoever for the RSV's translation of *exousia* as 'veil'.) However, the authority being referred to here is not that of the man over woman, but rather the

authority of the woman herself. In spite of the margin note found in some bibles, there is no parallel for taking the grammatical structure in v.10 in a passive sense, which must be done if the 'authority' is to mean authority *over* the woman rather than authority *of* the woman.

It is sometimes assumed that Paul's quotations from the creation narratives should themselves be seen as indicating the authority of the man over the woman; but leaving aside the question as to whether this concept is proclaimed in the Genesis narratives anyway, it seems more likely that the Greek-speaking readers would see the mention of woman being created from man as emphasising the idea of origin rather than as introducing the idea of authority. Similarly, it is sometimes assumed that because Christ is presented as the head of every man, and Christ clearly does have authority, then it must be authority that is the basic meaning of head. However, the idea of 'source' would fit in equally well here too; Col.1:18, where Christ is spoken of as the head in the context of his being before all things and the source of creation, would support this view. The idea of head as meaning 'source' would also make sense in the phrase, 'the head of Christ is God', and incidentally remove some of the problems of subordinationism that have arisen from this verse.

Thus one cannot assume that the context of 1 Cor.11:3 supports interpreting the term 'head' to imply the authority of man over woman.

## 2) Ephesians 5:21-33

In Ephesians 5, the headship of the man over his wife and the submission of the woman to her husband are found together, and this does appear to give support to Birney's identification of the two concepts. However, two points must be noted. Firstly, the headship of Christ over the church, used here as an analogy for the headship of the husband over the wife, is interpreted in this passage not in terms of the authority which Christ undoubtedly has over the church, but in terms of his loving and total self-giving on her behalf. Thus it seems logical that the headship of the man should also be seen in that way.

In fact, rather than seeing the subjection of the wife as a direct consequence of the headship of the husband over her, the passage sees a conflict between the two ideas. Verse 24 begins not with a 'therefore', as the AV illegitimately implies, but with a strong 'but' (*alla*). Most translators, assuming like Birney that headship is to be seen in terms of a ruling authority, have difficulty here and are forced to change the clear adversative sense by omitting the 'but' (RSV, NIV, TEV) or by replacing it with a 'therefore'. If however, we follow the analogy given in the chapter and see the headship of the husband here

as indicating that he should love his wife and give himself fully on her behalf, then the 'but' makes good sense. Though the husband is to love and serve his wife in this way, she must not forget that, as the church is subject to Christ, she too is to be subject to her husband in everything.

Thus the element of authority as such is not found in the context of Paul's use of the headship metaphor and it is by no means self-evident, therefore, that we should include this concept in our own understanding of the term.

### C. Paul's teaching about authority

Outside of the use of the term 'head', the concept of authority is found twice elsewhere in the writings of Paul in connection with the relationship between husband and wife, or man and woman. Firstly in 1 Cor.7 we are told that the wife does not have authority (*exousia*) over her own body, but the husband does. However, whatever kind of authority Paul may have in mind in this instance, the authority of the husband over the wife referred to is exactly paralleled by her authority over him. 'The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does' (v.4).

Secondly, in 1 Tim.2:12 Paul tells us that he permits no woman to teach or have authority over a man. (Or again, possibly no wife to teach or have authority over her husband.) It is not the place here to discuss whether or not Paul is giving his personal opinion or dealing with a specific situation at Ephesus, or what he meant by teaching and the implications of the illustrations he uses. All of these and other questions need further investigation before we can make certain pronouncements about what women may or may not be permitted to do in the assembly; but here we are concerned with investigating principles regarding the relationship between men and women. Two points need to be noted here. Firstly that the verb used for 'to have authority' is not the verb formed from *exousia*, but a little used verb, *authentem*, a strong word with the sense of a self-directed domineering. The AV catches something of the idea with its 'to usurp authority'. Thus Paul may be referring here to a particular kind of authority which the woman does not have and is therefore not to use. Secondly, it does seem clear that Paul is making some distinction in relationship here; but, though it may be implied, it is not made explicit that the reverse of Paul's statement is true. That is, the case would need to be argued that Paul, in stating that the woman is not to usurp authority over the man, is in fact stating that this is because the man

has authority over the woman. It may be decided that this is so, but it is not self-evident.

#### *D. Submission*

It is helpful to note, as Birney rightly does, that the word used to describe the submission of the woman to her husband is clearly distinguished from the word used for obedience, for example of a child to his parents or a slave to his master. He also emphasises the voluntary nature of this submission. It is significant that nowhere in the new testament is any ruler or authority within or without the church ever told to subject others to himself, or to take any action to ensure the submission of others. The root meaning of the word *hypotassō* is 'to order' or 'to arrange', and it can be used of ordering a military column.<sup>3</sup> There is an element of subordination, but the main idea is of 'mutual adaptation and co-ordination'. It can be seen as a voluntary putting first of the will and desires of the other. Paul in Eph.5:21 shows that for him the concept of mutual submission was by no means a contradiction in terms; in fact the special submission of wives to husbands can be seen not as a cancelling-out of this mutual submission in their case, but rather as a development of it.

It is also not clear why it should be automatically assumed that the submission called for from women in both 1 Cor.14:34 and 1 Tim.2:11 should immediately be assumed to be submission to men, rather than to the church as a whole, particularly as in 1 Cor.14 the whole context of the passage is of general church order. Eph.5 makes it very plain that there is a special submission called for from a wife to her husband, but it is not at all clear that this special submission is required from all women to all men.

It appears that much more justification is needed before one can see the principle, 'Man is to be the head of the woman' as implying the authority of the man over the woman or as synonymous with 'Woman is to be subject to man'. Certainly the possibility exists that further study might indicate the same conclusions as are inferred by Birney. But if we conclude that headship in itself does not imply authority, and bear in mind that subjection does not mean obedience as such, then it may be that when we apply Birney's two principles to the three key passages with which he deals, we shall come to a rather different understanding of their meaning and significance. This in turn would lead to a slightly different conclusion as to the position of women in worship today.

## NOTES

1. J. B. Hurley 'Did Paul require veils or the silence of women?' *Westminster Theological Journal*, 35 1972 pp.190-220.
2. S. Bedale 'The meaning of *kephalē* in the Pauline epistles' *Journal of Theological Studies*, JTS 5 1954, p.211.
3. M. Barth *Ephesians* (Anchor Bible) Doubleday, New York 1974, pp.710-711.