

Paul and the Prophetic Christian Women of Corinth

A reconstruction of the apostle's gender politics as documented in 1 Cor 11:2-16 (and Gal 3:26-28) *

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Summary

Early Christianity's basic assumption on gender is that it does not play any role in relation to redemption. The central performative sign of being redeemed through Christ is the gender-neutral ritual of baptism and gender-neutral community structures are a result of this. Paul is part of this gender-neutral movement, as can be seen in Gal 3:26-28. He shares in the general "dogma" that sex and gender are of no importance once a person is a new creation "in Christ". However, in 1 Cor 11:2-16 Paul is giving another impression of his position towards the relevance of sex and gender for the Christian way of life. He seems to claim a subordination of women and men, even speaking about a second-class "image of God" status for female believers. This contribution is inviting to read Paul's misogynist statements in 1 Cor 11 critically from the perspective of Gal 3, thus declaring gender-neutrality as an early Christian "dogma" while 1 Cor 11 is just a document of the cultural irritation of a Hellenistic Jewish man. Yet, even 1 Cor 11:2-16 can be seen as kind of "good news" for female Christians today, telling them that once you are equal to men there is no need to turn to man-like appearance.

Introduction

Paul was probably not a very even-tempered person. And even-tempered persons are most likely not apostle material in general, at least not in antiquity. Apostles like Paul had visions and obsessively travelled through the Mediterranean world to spread the message of a crucified Messiah, a message that appeared rather strange to the mainstream culture of the time. People who are at rest in themselves do not take such tasks upon themselves; doing so requires a good measure of eccentricity and fierceness. And yet, Paul's fierceness is not exclusively posi-

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tive, but also problematic in nature. For, it seems that he became so enraged at times as to momentarily forget his own theology, when faced with a concrete problem to solve. One such problem, which is now (in)famous, was the question if and how the women of Corinth were to cover their heads. Whereas the problem Paul tried to solve in this specific case has been tossed into the dustbin of history long ago, Paul's theological strategy for solving said problem has unfortunately not been forgotten – and this has devastating consequences for the gender politics pursued by Christian churches as well as for Paul's reputation. The cliché that Paul was a misogynist persists, and it is, among other things, based on the following segment in the first letter to the Corinthians.

The Text

² Ἐπαινῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς ὅτι πάντα μου μέμνησθε καί, καθὼς παρέδωκα ὑμῖν, τὰς παραδόσεις κατέχετε.

³ Θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ὅτι παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἡ κεφαλὴ ὁ Χριστὸς ἐστίν, κεφαλὴ δὲ γυναικὸς ὁ ἀνὴρ, κεφαλὴ δὲ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὁ θεός.

⁴ πᾶς ἀνὴρ προσευχόμενος ἢ προφητεύων κατὰ κεφαλῆς ἔχων καταισχύνει τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ.

⁵ πᾶσα δὲ γυνὴ προσευχομένη ἢ προφητεύουσα ἀκατακαλύπτω τῇ κεφαλῇ καταισχύνει τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτῆς· ἐν γὰρ ἐστίν καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ τῇ ἐξυρμημένῃ.

⁶ εἰ γὰρ οὐ κατακαλύπτεται γυνὴ, καὶ κειράσθω· εἰ δὲ αἰσχρὸν γυναικὶ τὸ κείρασθαι ἢ ξυρᾶσθαι, κατακαλυπτέσθω.

⁷ Ἄνὴρ μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ὀφείλει κατακαλύπτεσθαι τὴν κεφαλὴν εἰκὼν καὶ δόξα θεοῦ ὑπάρχων· ἡ γυνὴ δὲ δόξα ἀνδρὸς ἐστίν.

⁸ οὐ γὰρ ἐστίν ἀνὴρ ἐκ γυναικὸς ἀλλὰ γυνὴ ἐξ ἀνδρός·

⁹ καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἐκτίσθη ἀνὴρ διὰ τὴν γυναῖκα ἀλλὰ γυνὴ διὰ τὸν ἀνδρα.

¹⁰ διὰ τοῦτο ὀφείλει ἡ γυνὴ ἐξουσίαν ἔχειν

² I praise you, though, for remembering me in everything, and for keeping the traditions the way I passed them onto you.

³ Yet I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, but the head of Christ is God.

⁴ Every man who, praying or prophesying, has anything from his head defiles his head.

⁵ But every woman praying or prophesying with uncovered head defiles her head; for she is one and the same with the shorn one.

⁶ For if a woman does not cover herself, she shall be shaven also; but if it defiles a woman to be shorn or shaven, then she shall cover herself.

⁷ For a man must not cover his head, for he is image and reflection of God; the woman, though, is the reflection of the man.

⁸ For the man is not from the woman but the woman from the man;

⁹ for neither was the man created for the woman but the woman for the man.

¹⁰ Therefore the woman has to have

<p>ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς διὰ τοὺς ἀγγέλους.</p> <p>¹¹ πλὴν οὕτε γυνὴ χωρὶς ἀνδρὸς οὕτε ἀνὴρ χωρὶς γυναικὸς ἐν κυρίῳ·</p> <p>¹² ὡςπερ γὰρ ἡ γυνὴ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνδρός, οὕτως καὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ διὰ τῆς γυναικός· τὰ δὲ πάντα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ.</p> <p>¹³ Ἐν ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς κρίνατε· πρέπον ἐστὶν γυναῖκα ἀκατακάλυπτον τῷ θεῷ προ- σεύχεσθαι;</p> <p>¹⁴ οὐδὲ ἡ φύσις αὐτῆ διδάσκει ὑμᾶς ὅτι ἀνὴρ μὲν ἐὰν κομᾷ ἀτιμία αὐτῷ ἐστίν,</p> <p>¹⁵ γυνὴ δὲ ἐὰν κομᾷ δόξα αὐτῇ ἐστίν; ὅτι ἡ κόμη ἀντὶ περιβολαίου δέδοται [αὐτῇ].</p> <p>¹⁶ Εἰ δὲ τις δοκεῖ φιλόνηκος εἶναι, ἡμεῖς τοιαύτην συνήθειαν οὐκ ἔχομεν οὐδὲ αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τοῦ θεοῦ.</p>	<p>full authority of the head because of the angels.</p> <p>¹¹ However, neither the woman with- out the man, nor the man without the woman, in the Lord;</p> <p>¹² for like the woman from the man, so the man through the woman; but all from God.</p> <p>¹³ Judge for yourselves: Is it suitable for a woman to pray to God uncov- ered?</p> <p>¹⁴ And does not nature herself teach you that a man, if wearing long hair, is a shame for him,</p> <p>¹⁵ a woman, however, if wearing long hair, is an honour for her, because long hair is given [to her] instead of a cover?</p> <p>¹⁶ But if one is inclined to be conten- tious, we have no such custom, neither the congregations of God.</p>
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The problem in Corinth: No veil, loose hair, or “bob cut”?

Quite obviously, the issue at stake is that there should be a visible difference between men and women, when they pray in the congregation and actively prophesy. The man is not allowed to “have” anything “from the head” while the woman is supposed to be “covered”. Apparently in Corinth, some women decided to be active in the Christian congregation without “covering” themselves, and this bothers Paul immensely.

Unfortunately, the text does not mention any details about how, specifically, the women were “uncovered.” Therefore, it comes as no surprise that scholars have vastly different opinions about what exactly constituted the problem. In the older research literature, they assume that the women took off their customary veils and revealed their hair, possibly by wearing it loose entirely, in order to emphasize their femininity. This understanding – still powerful in many churches (cf. the article of Aryeh in this volume) – is flawed, of course, because Paul emphasizes specifically that there ought to be a visible difference between men and women. Insisting on such a visible difference between the genders would not make sense if the women criticized would have stressed their femininity

by displaying their long hair. This gives us more reason to believe that the women intended to hide their femininity and to appear more similar to men. Marlis Gielen, in this vein, considers this passage a dispute about the hairstyle worn by women in Corinth (cf. Gielen 2009; Friesen 2018). After providing a very careful evaluation of all textual details and of the cultural context, she claims that the women in Corinth chose to wear short haircuts, approximating the physical appearance of men. It is this optical masculinization that Paul so vehemently rejected.

The best argument to support Gielen's thesis is the fact that verses 4-5 and 14-15 correspond. By repeating the expression "from the head" (11:4), Paul himself decodes it as a reference to "long hair" (11:14) in men, and it can be deduced from the parallel structure of the verses that the long, honour-related hair, which "nature" has bestowed onto woman as a cover (11:15), is the opposite of what is denoted by the expression "uncovered" in verse 5. Consequently, Paul's use of the term "uncovered" marks a concrete criticism of short haircuts that no longer function adequately as a "cover" of women's heads. Paul deems such haircuts just as dishonourable as shaving or shearing for women.

The question, however, is what kind of idea might have inspired Christ-believing women in Corinth to turn against the gender stereotype "man = short hair" and "woman = long hair." What made them violate the norm of visible gender difference, valid in the Jewish minority culture and the Hellenistic-Roman mainline culture alike, by getting a "typically masculine" short haircut?

What motivated the women of Corinth: "All are one in Christ"

Paul himself provides a hidden clue to what may have moved Christian women in Corinth to make their appearance resemble men by getting a bobbed cut¹. In his *Captatio benevolentiae* at the beginning of the para-

¹ One variant of the bob cut, a short hairstyle worn by women, is the "Bubikopf." This German expression for a short haircut worn by a woman was commonly used during my childhood. "Bubikopf" literally translates to "little boy's head", and I use the terms "bob cut" here (and "Bubikopf" in the original German text) to point out that a short hairstyle was deemed masculine even in the second half of the last century. Dating back to the 1920s, this hairstyle was certainly permissible for women in the 1960s, but in rural Franconia where I grew up, it was still considered a slightly frivolous fashion due to the playful masculinization of women involved, thus being equivalent to wom-

graph, Paul praises the congregation for keeping the tradition exactly as he passed it on (11:2). This insinuates that the problem he discusses in the passage that follows arose from the congregation's interpretation of Paul's own preaching. If we were to ask which element of his preaching might be at stake here, we would have to look for a tradition that Paul has himself received and consequently passed on to the congregation. Neither the tradition of the last supper (1 Cor 11:23-25) nor the resurrection kerygma (1 Cor 15:3-5) comes to mind. What does come to mind is the baptismal creed (below in |frames|), which Paul cites in Gal 3:26-28:

²⁶ Πάντες γὰρ υἱοὶ θεοῦ ἐστε διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

²⁶ For you are all sons of God through your faith in Jesus Christ:

²⁷ ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε,

²⁷ for whosoever you were baptized in Christ,

Χριστὸν ἐνεδύσασθε.

You put on Christ;

²⁸ οὐκ ἐνὶ Ἰουδαίῳ οὐδὲ Ἑλλήνι,

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Hellene,

οὐκ ἐνὶ δοῦλῳ οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερῳ,

There is not slave and free,

οὐκ ἐνὶ ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ.

There is not male and female;

πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἰς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

for you are all one in Jesus Christ.²

This early Christian baptismal text most probably derives from the Syrian (nowadays Turkish) city of Antiochia where Paul's Christian mother congregation was located. As can be assumed the new members put off their clothes (symbolizing their old, pagan identity) before entering the water naked. When leaving the water, they put on new, most probably white, clothes (symbolizing their new identity "in Christ"). So, one may think that the baptismal text, quoted in Gal 3:27-28, was spoken (or sung) to the newly baptized Christians when leaving the water of baptism. In this *Sitz im Leben*, the central message of the hymn would con-

en wearing trousers and smoking. Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_cut and [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bubikopf_\(Frisur\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bubikopf_(Frisur)).

² It is widely accepted that Paul uses an ancient credo, which was likely spoken in conjunction with the baptism, in this passage. Cf. Schnelle 2003: 316-318. The precise differentiation between the pre-Pauline credo and the Pauline frame text is of course disputed. I take my bearings from Bormann 2008: 110.

sist in relating their new dress to their new status as a representation or personification of the Messiah.

It can be gleaned from 1 Cor 12:13 (cf. also 1 Cor 7:21-22) that this early Christian baptismal text was part of what Paul preached initially in Corinth when founding the Christian congregation there. Obviously, he alludes to it in 1 Cor 12 (and most probably in 1 Cor 7) without, however, repeating the statements regarding gender. This explains itself if we assume that the conflict about crew cuts arose from those very statements. It also means that we have to assume that Paul brought this text to Corinth, along with the idea that the congregation should have a gender-neutral structure. This interpretation is furthermore supported by the fact that Paul in 1 Cor 11 never denies women's right to play an active role in the congregation. He never questions that women are entitled to pray and prophesy in the same manner as men (11:4-5)³. He "only" wants them not to look like men as they do so. However, if Paul brought a gender-neutral ecclesiology based on the Antiochian baptismal creed to Corinth, then he also opened his teaching up to be understood precisely how the women who sported bobbed cuts understood him. This becomes rather clear when we take a closer look at the baptismal creed and the way in which Paul frames it in Gal 3 (cf. Kügler 2014; Leutzsch 2004:607). The baptismal creed annihilates the basic status differences of antique society and associates this annihilation with the baptism, which is interpreted as "putting on Christ."

Within the cultural symbolism of clothing, common in ancient societies, such putting on is not understood as a gesture that is merely external. Rather, clothing expresses the role and the status of a person in society. It is, in a sense, an integral part of the person, and the antique notion of personhood as it is, focuses on the role of the individual in society, that is to say on the individual's status and impact. For the High Priest at the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, priestly garments are of such great importance that he is not even able to perform the duties of his office without this special clothing. This is why the Romans (following King Herod's example) lock it away to keep him from exercising his office independently (cf. Schäfer 2010:113 f., referring to Joseph, Ant. 15,11,4, 403 f.). The clothing of the king, too, is integral to his role and makes his roy-

³ For this reason (among others), 1 Cor 14:33b-36 cannot come directly from Paul. Cf. the accessible summary of all of the arguments given by Gielen (2017: 12 f.) Her conclusion: "The passage is a post-Pauline insertion, which was done under the influence of the pastoral letters" (ibid. 13).

al position of power visible. When a king wears golden or silver clothing, he expresses that he is assigned divine quality in his royal office. Emperor Nero, for example, “dressed in purple robes and a Greek coat embroidered with golden stars” (Suetonius, Nero 25,1) to assert and display his position as divine ruler with cosmic power. For Jewish kings, however, it is somewhat precarious to claim royal divinity, due to the monotheistic dogma of Jewish religion. As Jewish historian Josephus recounts, God punishes King Agrippa I with death because the latter does not reject the flatteries offered to him by his entourage. They called him God when he wore silver robes in public, signalling claims to divine dignity (Jos. Ant. 19,8,1).⁴ This motive can moreover be found in the Jesus-tradition, for example in the miracle story of the healing of the bleeding woman. She is not only healed right away when she secretly touches the saviour’s clothing but Jesus also *feels* powerful energy flowing from it (Mk 5:27-30)⁵. When, in popular (rather magical) conception such power is attributed to Jesus’s clothing what must it be like to put on the Messiah himself!

Whoever wears Christ like clothing transforms into Christ in terms of status, role and function and participates in his divine dignity and power. Paul holds this view, too, and this is why he emphasizes that all believers are “sons of God in Christ” in his introduction of the citation (Gal 3:26). It is not a coincidence that Paul does not use the gender-neutral term “children of God” here. For one, the Messiah is a male figure and all who put him on are consequently *sons* of God “in Christ”. Secondly, a son had a completely different status in ancient society than a daughter. Only the son was considered the reflection or replication of the father; usually, only the son had the right to inherit property; and only he (as deputy of the father) had oversight of his sisters. In most Greek city-states, a daughter had no fortune and was not entitled to inherit property. If the daughter was not yet married when her father died, she was part of the estate and was passed on to the closest male relative as part of the inheritance. A woman was not an autonomous person in legal affairs. She could therefore not engage in business transactions, could not testify as a witness in court, or start legal proceedings of her own. All of her life, she was *de facto* subjected to a lord’s (κύριος) power of disposition. A lord of this sort was the father, the husband, or some

⁴ The story, which appears in different form in Acts 12:21-23, simultaneously demonstrates how difficult it was for Jewish kings to escape the dominant ideology of the rulers’ divinity.

⁵ Cf. also the healing power of the tassels in Jesus’s clothes in Mt 14:36.

other male relative (cf. Reinsberg 1989:36-37). While the weakening of patriarchal structures in Hellenistic times eased these constraints, it cannot be said that the perception of women as inferior beings was ever completely overcome. There were indeed female philosophers, public benefactors, entrepreneurs, authors, and ship owners later on, but these women remained the exception confirming the rule. One also can sum up the situation in Roman time in similar ways: while some few individual women held their own alongside men, this was in contravention with expectation and convention.

In this cultural context, it would not have profited women to be called “daughters of God”. As daughters, they would have been subordinated to their “brothers” in the congregation, and they would have shared in the divine character of their heavenly “father” only indirectly. By declaring all believers *sons* of God, however, Paul attributes the same status held by men to the women in the congregation. Hence, he concludes his citation of the Antiochian baptismal text with “you are all one (εἶς).” By using the *masculine* singular instead of the neuter singular εἷς, Paul expresses that the unity of the Christians is not an abstract one. As all Christians, even female believers, are “in Christ”, i.e. in the messianic *son* of God, their unity is that of a (masculine) body. As the Christian congregation is the living “body” of the Messiah (1 Cor 12:27) the believers are a *masculine* one/εἶς and not only a *neutral* one/εἷς.

For modern readers, this soteriological “trans-gendering” may appear as something rather strange. However, under the historical conditions given at Paul’s time, the soteriological change of women’s gender is not motivated by misogynistic ideology, widespread in antiquity, but rather by early Christian ideas of gender-equality. Thus it is the attempt to start something new under the conditions of the “old, unredeemed world”. When women, too, are “sons of God”, it affects their status within the church in a positive way.

That the apostle is serious about masculinizing women soteriologically can be gleaned from his consistent support of a gender-neutral ecclesiology, which results in a congregational practice that in principle allows any person to take on any role in the congregation without regard for social status, ethnic-religious origin, and gender. The one and only criterion is ability, which, for Paul, is a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12). This gender neutrality already belonged to the central claims of the baptismal tradition that Paul has received. Interestingly, when the category of gender is at stake, it is never claimed that there no longer are men and

women. Instead, the terms “male” and “female” are employed by the Antiochian creed. This suggests that the Syrian tradition was not concerned with eliminating the gender assignment of individuals but with dissolving the gender aspect of roles within the congregation. In practice, this means: prophesying is neither male/masculine nor female/feminine; leading the congregation is not female/feminine and not male/masculine; speaking in tongues is neither male/masculine nor female/feminine; inviting to the Eucharist is neither female/feminine nor male/masculine; being sent out as a missionary by Christ is neither male/masculine nor female/feminine; preaching is not male/masculine and serving is not female/feminine, etc. For this reason, early Christian congregations had female deacons like Phoebe (Rom 16:1), female apostles like Junia (Rom 16:7), female hosts (cf. Pihlava 2017) etc. The congregation in Rome illustrates furthermore that the early Christian non-gender-ecclesiology was not limited to the area under Antiochian-Pauline influence. This congregation arose independently of Paul, and a women’s council obviously played a prominent role in it. Paul mentions Mary (Rom 16:6), Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis (Rom 16:12) by name.⁶

Why “sons of God” ought to look like men

If Paul has now announced the salvation-related “masculinity” of Christian women along with a non-gender-ecclesiology in Corinth, then this is an evidently emancipatory impulse in front of the backdrop of the patriarchal culture of his time. It gave women access to unaccustomed areas for self-realization and participation within the framework of the congregation and enabled them to experience the “body of Christ” as a real space of freedom. Of course, there is one problem the early Christian movement could not solve: Their internal gender politics always stood

⁶ Schreiber 2000 argues that the expression *κοπιῶ ἐν κυρίῳ* / working hard in the Lord (Rom 16:12) is a technical term which Paul uses to mean ‘to lead the congregation’. This claim has recently been criticized by Scherer 2016. In her contribution, she emphasizes that the concrete position held by the women in question cannot be gleaned from Paul’s statement. However, she also emphasizes that gender was not a relevant criterion when it comes to access to the roles, duties, and positions within Roman congregations. In Paul’s time, the Roman congregation was thus part of the broad stream of early Christian non-gender-ecclesiology. Imagine if Rome had remained faithful to its apostolic origins in this point!

out from the cultural background of a differently oriented dominant culture; it was forced to interact with the latter without, however, being able to actually reshape it.⁷

And this cultural context was shaped by an ideal that sweepingly subordinates women to men, based on a deep-seated contempt for women, and for everything conceived as being feminine. One example from an area that was culturally close to the Hellenistic Jew Paul and his urban public shall suffice here.

To Philo of Alexandria, the most important Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher and interpreter of the Bible, it is self-evident that masculinization is the way to salvific enlightenment for women (and men). If women want to become fully human in this sense, they have to masculinize themselves. *De Cherubim 41* is particularly salient in this regard, because Philo asserts in this text that “woman is to be symbolically understood as sensuality, but knowledge consists of alienation from sensuality and from the body.” This assessment of womanhood appears within a more general conceptualization of gender roles, which defines the relation of the sexes/genders as a qualitative hierarchy. Woman is weak and therefore has to submit to man, whose leadership she cannot exist without. Along with the majority of his contemporaries, Philo is convinced that men are qualitatively superior to women. Philo’s hierarchical conceptualization of the sexes/genders can be illustrated, woodcut-style, in the following chart:

<i>female/feminine = negative</i>		<i>male/masculine = positive</i>
passive		active
receiving		giving
serving		ruling
weak		strong
sensuality		rationality
physical		spiritual

Since sexuality belongs to the realm of earthly passions and desires of which one is to rid oneself, and women are perceived as sexual beings, it follows logically that they, the weak sex, are assigned a position below

⁷ A miniscule alternative group lacked the agency required for effecting the societal change necessary to accomplish this. The bitter irony, of course, is that the antique church obtained the power to shape society only by abandoning its goal of fundamentally changing the world and assimilating, for the most part, to the values of the dominant culture. Cf. eg. Plümacher 1987 on this process, which began as early as the first century and implied the end of alternative gender politics.

men. This conceptualization affects Philo's soteriology in different ways. On the one hand, Philo uses gender metaphors very frequently to express his thoughts; on the other hand, this use of metaphors becomes desexualized in peculiar ways. Because of the negative connotations associated with womanhood, Philo cannot conceive of the human soul striving for virtues, as female/feminine, even though the soul is in a role he should see as typically female. The soul is subordinated to God, is controlled by him, and receives his *logos*. To work out this problem, Philo conceptualizes a "masculine" woman, the "virgin"⁸ who is untouched by what Philo considers the most severe defect of womanhood, namely menstruation. The virgin as a "non-woman" can be understood, and accepted, to be nearly masculine. Consequently, not the woman but only the virgin, as a trans-gender entity, meets the requirements of Philo's Platonizing allegorical concept. The human soul as a virgin is in keeping with the common gender-hierarchy – the more masculine someone or something is, the higher their value.

The perception of women as inferior, together with all things seen as feminine, did not only regulate the realm of philosophical theory, of course. Philo also extols the lifestyle of the virgin as the way of life that amounts to the perfect form of an existence liberated from earthly defilement. Virginity as concrete way of life thus also constitutes a moral and religious ideal. In *contempl.* 68, Philo reports on the virgins in the congregation of the *Therapeutae*⁹, who deny bodily pleasures and do not aspire to produce corporeal progeny. They are blessed by God with the divine gifts of wisdom as the immortal progeny of the soul. As "non-women" these female members of Philo's ideal Jewish congregation can reach the masculine domains of philosophy that can lead near to God, the perfection of masculinity. Just how extremely far, in Philo's thinking, woman is removed from being equal to man also becomes clear when he speaks about specific real women. Let his reference to Livia, the wife of Augustus and First Lady of the entire Roman Empire in *Legatio ad Gaium* 319*f.* serve as an example here. To Philo, women's discernment is categorically weaker than men's. Yet this is different in Livia's case. Her perfect, masculine education sets her apart from regular women, and she generally deserves praise for her masculinity, which all other women are lacking. He writes that Livia "was rather like a man in her rational thinking, which was so discerning that she comprehended concepts of thought better than objects of perception and deemed the latter shadows of the former" (*Gai.* 320). In general, one has to conclude that the best thing Philo can say about a woman is precisely that she isn't one.

⁸ In Philo, "virgin" denotes not only a young woman before the onset of menstruation but also an older woman after menopause.

⁹ It is doubtful that the ideal Jewish congregation of the *Therapeutae* described by Philo actually existed. If it did, it did not leave any historical traces except in Philo's book.

Philo's misogyny is an extreme example but Hellenistic Roman culture in general must be understood as a patriarchal one, which in theory and practice put women and everything conceived as feminine in second place. On the other hand, the first place always was reserved for men and everything conceived as masculine.¹⁰ If we imagine for only a moment that the young congregation in Corinth hears the message that all believers are *sons of God in Christ*, that all are *one*, in the context of such massive, culturally dominant misogyny, it immediately becomes clear why women might interpret the teaching that in the Christian community there is *not male and not female* not only as a programme of gender-neutrality but as an indiscriminate masculinization of all believers. And if all things material-corporeal are deemed feminine (= inferior), the body of a woman has to be considered doubly inferior – being a *female* body and being a *body*! What response could be more plausible than to assimilate such an inferior body to the higher state of masculinity a believer reached “in Christ”? Creating a kind of man-like physical appearance seems a response of high plausibility – at least under the condition of a patriarchal cultural system. And, one must even say that a short haircut constitutes a quite moderate body modification that could be hidden easily when moving outside the Christian assembly. Men seem to have forgone such procedures in Corinth. That they, too, understood their being “in Christ” as a masculinization, however, can be gleaned from the debate about sexual ethics Paul introduces in his first letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthian slogan “It is good for a man (= human being, Greek: ἀνθρώπου!) not to touch a woman”, which is quoted by Paul (1 Cor 7:1), without rendering his own opinion (cf. Merklein 1983; vs. Leutzsch 2004:603 f.), reveals on the one hand that being male was equated with being fully human; on the other hand, it reveals that Christian men, too, considered it a Christian ideal to pursue full masculinity by overcoming the corporeal-sensual aspects of human life. Dominating

¹⁰ It must be clear that the gender hierarchy was not the only hierarchy in the Roman world. As the Empire, since Augustus' time, was a *de facto* monarchy with an old-fashioned republican façade, there was need of a strict hierarchy among men too. The more powerful a man was the more masculine. The most masculine man was the emperor on top of the social pyramid. In some cases the hierarchy among men also was expressed by sexual power. As long as the social hierarchy was reproduced in homosexual acts there was no major problem. That is why cases where the social hierarchy was denied in sexual acts are better documented (cf. Kügler 2016: 164).

sexual desire and all other kind of lust proves the man to be a real man. If the *nous*, the intellectual (= masculine) part of human mind is ruling like a king the inner life of a person, controlling everything like a sovereign, the person is fully masculine, a real man according to cultural concepts of Paul's time. Due to the positive bias towards masculinity it was less likely that men had the idea of modifying their body, already conceived as male/masculine. De-sexualizing actions similar to the self-castration of Origen later on, are not reported for Pauline congregations.

If “sons of God” are women, they ought to look like women

To be sure, it is easy to suspect that Paul, too, believes that to be properly human is to be male. After all, he is part of the same Jewish-Hellenic culture as his contemporary Philo. Yet it is important to beware of such cultural “co-optation.” For unlike Philo, Paul is more of a Pharisaic Jew and less of a Platonizing Hellenist, and he therefore does not share Philo's alienation from the body. This becomes particularly evident in several passages in the first letter to the Corinthians. Paul declares the body “the temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19) and preaches the Pharisaic concept of bodily resurrection. Even if he narrows his concept of the eschatological body to the Hellenistic concepts prevalent among the Corinthian Christians by speaking of a “spiritual body” (15:35 ff.), he fundamentally abides by holistic Jewish anthropology which does not categorically devalue the human body. Likewise, his preference for celibacy in 1 Cor 7 is grounded in pragmatics and eschatology rather than in Platonic anthropology.

Paul subscribes neither to contempt for the body nor to contempt for women or the categorical devaluation of the feminine, and this emerges even from his emotional reaction to the attempts of masculinization exhibited by Christian women in Corinth. With utter vehemence, Paul fights for maintaining visible gender characteristics and thereby makes clear that masculinity on the soteriological level ought not result in denying the female body. Even though female Christians are sons of God on the spiritual level, they ought to remain what they are, namely women, in their physical appearance. If “sons of God in Christ” happen to be women according to sex and gender, then they ought to look like women, too. Being “in Christ” as a woman does not entail masculinizing oneself and denying one's own body. Christian women, being *sons* of God, have the same rights in church that men have (e.g. the right to pray

and prophesy publicly in the congregation) and need not masculinize themselves in order to exercise those rights.

Wouldn't this be a wonderful message today as well? Women may do anything in Christian communities that men do, and they need not deny their femininity in any way to do so! Unfortunately, this is a two-fold *irrealis*, because the patriarchal reality in many Christian churches looks very different for one, and secondly, because Paul in fact does not tell the Christian women in Corinth that they *may* remain women in Christ but that they *must* do so! What is more, he justifies this in a highly problematic way. In order to fight against the dissolution of visible gender difference, Paul resorts to a theological model that assumes the subordination of women to men based on the divine order of creation. According to this pattern of thought, which corresponds to a widespread early Jewish interpretation of the second creation story in Gen 2:4b-25 (cf. Küchler 1986), the chronological order of creation is a hierarchical order, and the creation of woman from the rib of man along with her designation as "helper" (understood as "servant") is interpreted as a God-willed subordination of women. This type of argumentation is theologically untenable¹¹, because Paul ignores not only the declarations made in the first creation story (compare 1 Cor 11:7 to Gen 1:27) but also his own soteriology, which he adopted from Antiochia, brought to the attention of the Galatian congregation, and proclaimed to the believers in Corinth during his initial preaching (as made plausible above). Moreover, the text also reveals that Paul himself realizes that his argumentation has gone awry. The verses 11:11 f. emphasize the mutual relationship and interdependence of man and woman and their origin in one another, which actually suspends Paul's earlier interpretation of the creation story. In what follows, Paul abandons theology altogether and makes recourse to categories like "suitability", "nature" and "custom". And it is highly probable that with these non-theological categories, he ends precisely at the point where the fierceness of his reaction originated. Women who quit wearing customary hairstyles that signal femininity according to the common cultural gender order disturb Paul deeply, make him suffer from a cultural shock. On the human level, this bewilderment may be understandable or even excusable.

¹¹ For once, I would not go along with my friend and colleague Marlis Gielen's attempt to exonerate Paul (Gielen 2009: 175-186).



However, when it comes to discussions about Christian concepts of redemption and of gender justice in the church and society nowadays, one should not grant more theological relevance to Paul's emotional reaction in terms of his cultural shock than to my poor grandmother's shock and disorientation upon seeing Marlene Dietrich in a trouser suit for the first time.

Paul and the gender politics of today's churches

Any Roman Catholic exegete suggesting that Paul's argumentation in 1 Cor 11:2-16 is best ignored in favour of his message that Christian women are entitled to do the same things as men without denying their femininity may run into trouble, mostly for two reasons:

Firstly, the Catholic exegesis exists in a framework of church-power that has over the past decades increasingly resorted to prohibiting discussions about the lack of gender equity in the church. The problems that might result from this context, however, simply must be endured in prophetic service to the church's faith – in keeping with Friedrich Dürrenmatt's motto "to look at things fearlessly and to fearlessly do

right" (*Romulus the Great*, 1950). The situation recently has somewhat eased anyway, although even under Pope Francis no official change of gender doctrine has taken place.

Secondly, from a scholarly perspective, a serious problem is raised by a question concerning the hermeneutic principles that allow us to criticize

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¹² Fig. Marlene Dietrich (in the public domain), source: <http://www.vavoomvintage.net/2012/01/friday-fashionistas-marlene-dietrich.html>.

a specific theological line of thought pursued by Paul without simultaneously abandoning Paul's letters as authoritative texts on the whole. Three reflections in particular allow for, even demand, a criticism of Paul's creation-theological lines of thought.

1. The interpretation of the second creation myth by Paul ignores the fundamental declaration (Gen 1:27) in the first narration of the creation of humankind, which is of at least equal theological weight, and he also does not realize the woman-friendly aspects inherent in the second creation story itself. Therefore, Paul's gender-hierarchical interpretation is open to inner-biblical criticism that departs from the Old Testament.
2. Paul's concept of gender-hierarchy in 1 Cor 11 contradicts his own teaching of the redeemed as a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). While the order of redemption does not simply suspend the order of creation in Paul's theology, it is otherwise obvious that the new order "in Christ" (and therefore also the behaviour of believers in the new world of the congregation) cannot be conceived as a simple restitution of the original order of creation. Therefore, the gender hierarchy in 1 Cor 11:3-10 is also open to inner-Pauline criticism that departs from his own soteriology.
3. The Antiochian baptismal text, which Paul cites in Gal 3, is a dogmatically higher-ranking text. It proclaims the absolute gender neutrality of roles and duties within the church and connects these to the nature of the baptism, i.e. with the essence of Christian existence as "being in Christ." This renders any idea of a continued "God-willed" subordination of women to men obsolete. For this reason, the gender hierarchy designed by Paul in 1 Cor 11 warrants clear criticism that departs from the Antiochian baptismal text, which is not only older but demands higher doctrinal authority due to its text genre.

Alternatively, we could of course disregard such hermeneutic principles, simply read the first letter to the Corinthians as literature (cf. Kügler 2013) instead, and smirk with serenity and nonchalance as Paul uses a sledge hammer to crack open a nut and haphazardly demolishes his own doctrine of salvation in the process – all because cultural reasons compel him to consider women who sport bobbed haircuts an anathema. However, in light of the fatal consequences brought about by this interpretation of the second creation story – particularly in its deutero-Pauline intensification in 1 Tim 2:11-15 – in the history of Christianity, such nonchalance is difficult to muster. After all, in the Roman Catholic

Church (as well as in many other churches), we find ourselves in a realm in which gender equity is bitterly lacking and misogyny is unfortunately all too familiar.

Even Pope Francis does not consider the customary opinion that women by their sex and gender are incapable of functioning as sacramental representation of Christ an erroneous one that needs to be corrected. This most probably owes to the fact that he grants this opinion the doctrinal authority of a binding tradition. Taking the first Christian generation's time into account, however, one must conclude that this custom rather is a sinful error, which has led the church away from the apostolic gospel.

This error cannot be justified by the customary separation of the grace of baptism from the grace of ordination. This argument, often used as a theological method of excluding women from ordination while at the same time ascribing equal dignity to all baptized Christians regardless of their sex¹³, misses the fundamental character of baptismal grace, which precedes and defines every structural formation of the church. Such a separation either denies the effect of salvation and baptism ("All baptized Christians are equal, but this must not affect gender differences when it comes to holding an office!") or it separates ordination from salvation and alleges an additional, independent appointment by Jesus. As is well known, there is no historical proof for the latter. Uncoupled from baptism, the fundamental sacrament of salvation, ordination exists in suspended state, and consequently men would not be able to bestow it either. Of course, one could take the position that doing away with ordination altogether would be a way of achieving gender equity within the church, but it is my hope as a basically conservative priest that there are other means for remedying clericalism and misogyny within my church. Paul and the doctrine that precedes him, at any rate, regard the baptism and salvation as the fundamental transformation of all believers that must lead to a gender-neutral church structure. Since all who have been baptized are transformed into Christ, women, too, are "sons of God" and consequently equal to men in all aspects of Christian life. They are children of Abraham with the right to inherit, able to personally represent

¹³ Cf. Francis 2013. Francis adopted this argumentative strategy from John Paul II. For a criticism of the respective statements cf. Merklein 1997, and in the same volume: Dassmann 1997. Cf. also the recent critique of Lüke 2018.

Christ because they have been transformed into the body of Christ. Anyone who claims that one half of the church is unable to sacramentally represent Christ because of their sex, however, must be told – in keeping with the apostolic tradition – that (s)he *de facto* denies salvation and takes biology to be more important than what occurs during baptism. This amounts to nothing less than the complete self-abandonment of the Christian message of salvation. If gender-neutral salvation does not even bring about an effect on office structures within the church, how could it ever bring about salvation in the world? Without effect, however, it is mere fiction – not grace, but only a *fata morgana* of grace.

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